

On the Alleged Metaphysical Superiority of Timelessness

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SUMMARY

Brian Leftow argues that timeless beings are metaphysically superior to temporal beings in view of their truer presence and unity. Leftow's argument that a timeless being has truer presence is based on a systematic misconstruction of tensed vs. tenseless theories of time, which invalidates his argument. Leftow's argument that temporal beings have less unity is based on a misunderstanding and reductionistic interpretation of the Special Theory of Relativity. Whether one adopts a presentist or non-presentist ontology, Leftow's further claim that temporal beings do not have their existence all at once is erroneous.

ON THE ALLEGED METAPHYSICAL SUPERIORITY OF TIMELESSNESS

In his recent study *Time and Eternity*, Brian Leftow maintains that timeless existence is metaphysically superior to temporal existence. [1] He argues at great length that timeless beings have a higher degree of existence, in view of their truer presence and greater unity, than temporal beings and are therefore metaphysically superior to them. [2] It follows that it would most benefit God, as a perfect being, to be timeless. In this paper I wish to assess Leftow's arguments in support of his claim.

I. The More Genuine Presence of Timeless Beings

The claim that timeless beings have more genuine presence than temporal beings is *prima facie* baffling since presence--or, better, presentness, to distinguish it from mere spatial presence, the opposite of absence--is the quintessential tensed temporal property. To ascribe presentness to a timeless being in any literal sense is patently self-contradictory, for if a timeless being had presentness, it would exist now, at the present time. As J. M. E. McTaggart, that patron of modern tensed theories of time, observed,

The eternal is often spoken of . . . as an 'eternal present.' As a metaphor this has . . . some appropriateness, but it cannot, I think, be taken as more than a metaphor. 'Present' is not like 'existence,' a predicate which can be applied in the same sense to the temporal and the timeless. On the contrary, its meaning seems to include a distinct reference to time . . . [3]

Thus, I think that Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann are more accurate than Leftow in thinking of God's eternal present as God's specious present which covers all of time, a subjective rather than objective present. [4] When ancient philosophers spoke of the eternal in present-tense terms--an idiom

which passed into medieval theology--, this usage was probably in default of the device of tenseless discourse, the inappropriateness of using past- or future-tense language being evident. As Plato wrote, "we say of it [Eternal Being] that it *was* and *shall be*, but on a true reckoning we should only say *is*, reserving *was* and *shall be* for the process of change in time." [5] Plato goes on to recognize the incongruity of using the present-tense "is" to speak of timeless eternity, but since no tenseless idiom was available, the present-tense was all that was left. This use of the present-tense with respect to the eternal led to metaphors like God's "eternal present" or even the *nunc stans* (static now) of eternity in contrast to the *nunc movens* (moving now) of time. If these metaphors are taken literally, they lead to absurdities. For example, God's eternal present must not elapse like the present instant, so it must somehow last, which leads to the malapropism of "atemporal duration." As Nelson Pike recognized, "if something *is*, but is such that is never correct to say that it *was*, or that it *will be*, it *is* in a sense of 'is' that does not mean 'is now'." [6]

But Leftow defends the assertion that a timeless being is most truly present, whether one adopts a tensed theory of time or a tenseless theory of time. Tensed theories hold that attributions of pastness, presentness, and futurity to things/events express in some way an objective feature of reality, not merely the perspective or subjective impression of sentient beings. According to Leftow "on a tensed theory of time, to exist = to be present." [7] Now while this assertion may characterize the view of some defenders of tensed theories, it is not true of all or perhaps even most. For many defenders of tensed theories would no doubt be quite prepared to admit, at least in principle, timeless existents into their ontology in the form of abstract objects, in addition to temporal existents. For such thinkers "to exist" may be tensed or tenseless, tensed in the case of temporal beings, tenseless in the case of atemporal entities. Only in the case of temporal beings is existence identical with being present. Thus, it is possible to be, but not to be present. Moreover, some defenders of tensed theories of time are quite prepared to say that past events exist and some even that future events exist, but that in neither case are such events present. Thus, "to exist" is tenseless and is not to be equated, in their view, with "to be present." Finally, those tense theorists who do equate existing with being present would not regard God, if He exists, as atemporal. Rather everything that exists, even abstract objects, exists temporally and is at some time present. Such thinkers would regard God, if He exists, as omnitemporal, as existing now, and as having a past, present, and future. None of these thinkers would agree with Leftow's claim that on a tensed theory of time

if a timeless being exists, it *ipso facto* is in some sense present Hence a timeless being exists in a present to which nothing is past or future, and within its duration nothing is past or future. If this is so, then arguably, timeless beings are more genuinely present than temporal beings: for they are present without taint of past or future. [8]

A present without past or future would be possible only if time were composed of a single instant, and

then it would not have any duration at all. A being existing at such a present would not be timeless, but temporal and fleeting. To use such tensed words in any other way is non-literal or misconceived.

Leftow goes on to develop further non-literal senses of presentness such as character-presence and existential-presence, both of which have to do with immutability, not presentness. These notions do nothing to show that a timeless being is more genuinely present than any temporal being. Moreover, a metaphysically necessary, temporal God is as existentially immutable as a timeless being, and character immutability as defined by Leftow (having all at once all the attributes one ever has) does not strike me as a perfection at all.

Leftow then turns to a justification of God's being more genuinely present on tenseless theories of time. Tenseless theories are characterized by the denial that there are tensed facts about the objective world, that things/events really are past, present, or future. All events in the temporal series of events, whether past, present, or future from our perspective, are on an ontological par, and the presentness of things/events simultaneous with us is just a subjective feature of consciousness.

Leftow, however, fundamentally misconstrues the tenseless view of time. He thinks that

On a tenseless theory of time, existence = presentness *or* pastness *or* futurity. . . The tenseless theorist will not grant that whatever exists at t is present at t . Tenseless theorists hold instead that whatever exists at t is present or past or future at t . . . On a tenseless theory, to exist at t = to be present or past or future at t . [9]

This characterization is mistaken. The defender of tenseless theories of time does not believe that there are any monadic properties of pastness, presentness, or futurity. Hence, he does not equate existence with the disjunction of such pseudo-properties, lest there be no such thing as existence either. Such theorists hold that things/events exist without ever being past, present, or future. The disjunctive analysis of "to exist" is actually a technique of some philosophers of tense to parse the tenseless use of the verb in tensed terms: to say "x exists (tenselessly)" = "x has existed or x exists or x will exist." Leftow seems to have confused this device with tenseless claims. Leftow is correct that tenseless theorists will not typically grant that whatever exists at t is present at t ; but he errs in his positive characterization of tenseless claims, that such theorists hold that whatever exists at t is past, present, or future at t . At the most, some defenders of tenselessness hold that an event at t may be past for some sentient subject at $t' > t$, present for such a subject at t , and future for such a subject at $t' < t$. Pastness, presentness, and futurity, insofar as these are not reducible to the relations earlier than, simultaneous with, and later than, are subjective features of consciousness. Finally, to exist at t is not to be present or past or future at t , but just to be tenselessly located at t ; tensed determinations have nothing to do with it.

These misunderstandings of the tenseless theory of time invalidate Leftow's further argument. He contends that because presentness has degrees, so does the disjunctive property of the three tense determinations. But philosophers of tenseless theories regard all of these properties as spurious. Similarly, Leftow proceeds to argue that the following claim is acceptable to such thinkers: "at t, existence located at t= presentness located at t." But such an identity statement is clearly false on tenseless theories, and the rest of the argument collapses. Hence, it seems to me that Leftow's attempt to justify the higher existence of a timeless being by means of its more genuine presence is maladroit.

II. The Greater Unity of Timeless Beings

What, then, of the purported greater unity of an atemporal being? Leftow claims that to exist is to exemplify a kind of unity and that since an atemporal being has greater unity than a temporal being, it has a greater degree of existence. Leaving aside the moot equation of existence and unity, we may ask why temporal beings have inherently less unity than timeless beings. Leftow's answer is that spatial objects are composed of parts and that "If the special theory of relativity is true, then whatever is located in time is located in space." [10]

But such an assertion is problematic for two reasons. In the first place, one could dispute the assertion on purely physical grounds alone in that it fails to make sufficient cognizance of the difference between coordinate time and parameter time. It is true that insofar as time plays the role of a coordinate, it is connected with a system of spatial coordinates, so that anything to which a temporal coordinate can be assigned is such that spatial coordinates are assignable to it as well. But insofar as time functions as a parameter, it is independent of space, and something which possesses temporal location and extension need not be held to exist in space as well as time. In Newtonian mechanics time plays the role of a parameter, not a coordinate, and, interestingly, the same is true of Einstein's formulation of the Special Theory of Relativity--the now familiar space-time formulation derives later from Minkowski. The Special Theory can be validly formulated in either way. Moreover, since the Special Theory is a local theory only, we must, in order to achieve a global perspective, consider time as it functions in cosmological models based on the General Theory of Relativity, on which matter Leftow is silent. While time is defined in the standard Friedman models by means of spatial hypersurfaces, the time parameter in the Robertson-Walker line element which describes the space-time metric is distinguished precisely by its independence of space. Moreover, spatio-temporal coordinates in the General Theory are purely conventional and have no physical significance. Thus, it is not obvious that a being could not exist at a certain moment of cosmic time without being spatially located as well.

But Leftow's argument suffers from a far more serious shortcoming than this. The argument appears to rest upon a crucial presupposition which will affect fundamentally one's theories of time and eternity and which I believe to be profoundly mistaken, namely, the reductionistic equation of time with physical time,

that is to say, with time as it plays a role in physics. That this equation is mistaken is obvious from the simple fact that whereas physical time came into existence after the Big Bang singularity, time itself may well have existed prior to the initial cosmological singularity. A succession of mental events in God's mind--His counting, for example--would alone suffice to generate a temporal series in the absence of any physical objects whatsoever. [11] Thus, it is plainly not the case that something is in time if and only if it is in space--and that metaphysical truth is not negated by the fact that in physical theory an event which is assigned a temporal coordinate in space-time also has spatial coordinates as well. [12]

Leftow also asserts that a timeless being has greater unity than a temporal being because it "has its duration all at once," whereas a temporal being's duration "is dribbled out to it one instant at a time." [13] One could complain about these characterizations on the grounds that a timeless being has no literal duration at all and that temporal becoming need not proceed by instants. But these inaccuracies can be remedied without affecting the gist of the argument. Just substitute "existence" for "duration" and "serially" for "one instant at a time." Nonetheless, on an ontology of presentism, according to which the only temporal things/events that exist are those that are present, a temporal being which is present has all its existence which there is, and a timeless being can boast of no more unity than that. As for unity over time, this consists in its identity over time, its enduring as the same object through intrinsic change; this feat (which is impossible for a timeless being) is plausibly taken as testimony to its unity, rather than as detracting from it. On the other hand, if we adopt a tenseless theory of time, then it is false that the existence of temporal objects is dribbled out to them over time. Rather they just exist tenselessly at their (spatio-)temporal locations and their unity is just as great as that of a timeless being. Indeed, to borrow Leftow's terminology, relative to a timeless being the world-line of a temporal object (which many partisans of the tenseless theory take to be just the object itself) is extrinsically timeless, even though it is intrinsically temporal in that it has internally a structure ordered by temporal relations. Nothing comes to be or passes away; everything just exists (tenselessly). So it is difficult to see how a timeless being qua timeless would have any greater unity than a temporal being.

In conclusion, I do not see that Leftow has shown that timeless beings inherently possess a truer presentness nor a greater degree of unity than temporal beings. Hence, he has not demonstrated that a timeless God is metaphysically superior to a temporal God. [14]

Footnotes:

[\[1\]](#)

Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 278.

[\[2\]](#)

Ibid., chap. 5.

[\[3\]](#)

John Ellis McTaggart, "The Relation of Time and Eternity," *Mind* 18 (1909): 347.

[\[4\]](#)

Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity, Awareness, and Action," *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992): 468.

[\[5\]](#)

Plato *Timaeus* 7. 38.

[\[6\]](#)

Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness, Studies in Ethics and the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), p. 15.

[\[7\]](#)

Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, p. 84.

[\[8\]](#)

Ibid.

[\[9\]](#)

Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, p. 91.

[\[10\]](#)

Ibid., p. 100; cf. p. 98.

[\[11\]](#)

For good statements of the point see Grace M. Jantzen, *God's World, God's Body, with a Foreword by John MacQuarrie* [London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1984], p. 44); W. Norris Clarke, *The Philosophical Approach to God* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Wake Forest University, 1979), p. 94.

[\[12\]](#)

The two contemporary thinkers who have signaled the distinction between time and physical time most clearly are Quentin Smith, *Language and Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), chap. 7 and Alan Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time* (N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1992), chap. 1.

[\[13\]](#)

Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, p. 98.

[\[14\]](#)

Leftow also claims that by examining the ways by which we distinguish dreams from reality, we discover several criteria of high reality which also serve to show that timeless beings have greater reality than temporal beings (*Ibid.*, pp. 100-110). The procedure, however, seems to me to be misdirected, since the criteria are only criteria for our distinguishing reality from dreams; they are not properties which make the world more real than dreams. Leftow confuses the *ordo cognoscendi* with the *ordo essendi*.