

On the Argument for Divine Timelessness from the Incompleteness of Temporal Life

William Lane Craig

SUMMARY

A promising argument for divine timelessness is that temporal life is possessed only moment by moment, which is incompatible with the existence of a perfect being. Since the argument is based on the experience of time's passage, it cannot be circumvented by appeal to a tenseless theory of time. Neither can the argument be subverted by appeals to a temporal deity's possession of a specious present of infinite duration. Nonetheless, because the argument concerns one's experience of time's passage rather than the objective reality of temporal becoming itself, it is considerably weakened by the fact that an omniscient being possessing perfect memory and foreknowledge need not find such experience to be an imperfection.

ON THE ARGUMENT FOR DIVINE TIMELESSNESS FROM THE INCOMPLETENESS OF TEMPORAL LIFE

In his study of time and eternity, [1] Brian Leftow argues that the fleeting nature of temporal life provides grounds for affirming that God is timeless. Drawing on Boethius's characterization of eternity as *complete possession all at once* of interminable life, Leftow points out that a temporal being is unable to enjoy what is past or future for it. The past is gone forever, and the future is yet to come. The passage of time renders it impossible for any temporal being to possess all its life at once. Even God, if He is temporal, cannot reclaim the past. Leftow emphasizes that even perfect memory cannot substitute for actuality: "the past itself is *lost*, and no memory, however complete, can take its place-- for confirmation, ask a widower if his grief would be abated were his memory of his wife enhanced in vividness and detail." [2] By contrast a timeless God lives all His life at once and so suffers no loss. Therefore, if God is the most perfect being, He is timeless.

Here I think we have an argument for divine timelessness that is really promising. The premisses of the argument rest on very powerful intuitions about the irretrievable loss that arises through the experience of temporal passage, a loss which intuitively should not characterize the experience of a most perfect being. The force of these considerations is such that Stump and Kretzmann have rested their case for divine timeless eternity solely on the shoulders of this argument, commenting,

No life, even a sempiternal life, that is imperfect in its being possessed with the radical incompleteness entailed by temporal existence could be the mode of existence of an absolutely perfect being. A perfectly possessed life must be devoid of any past, which would be no longer possessed, and of any future, which would be not yet possessed. The existence of an absolutely perfect being must be an

indivisibly persistent present actuality. [3]

Whatever we may think of their demand for persistence and presentness, the claim that the life of a most perfect being must be indivisible actuality has a good deal of plausibility.

Notice that because the argument is based on the *experience* of temporal passage, [4] rather than on the objective reality of temporal passage itself, it cannot be circumvented by the adoption of a tenseless theory of time according to which the experience of temporal becoming is non-veridical and all times/things/events are equally real. Even if the future never becomes and the past is never really lost, the fact remains that for a temporal being the past is lost *to him* and the future is not accessible *to him*. As Wells's celebrated Time Traveller, who believed that time was a fourth dimension of space, remarked, "Our mental existences, which are immaterial and have no dimensions, are passing along the Time-Dimension with a uniform velocity from the cradle to the grave." [5] Even if the cradle and the grave do not differ in their ontological status, we still find ourselves experientially at some point in between, and events which are located at times earlier than that point are irretrievably lost to us, and events later than that point can only be anticipated. For this reason a tenseless theory of time does nothing to alleviate the loss occasioned by our experience of temporal becoming. We can only shake our heads in bewilderment that Einstein, upon the death of his life-long friend Michael Besso, tried to comfort Besso's surviving son and sister by writing, "This signifies nothing. For us believing physicists the distinction between past, present, and future is only an illusion, even if a stubborn one." [6] I dare say that the bereaved find little comfort in the thought that the world-line of a deceased loved one exists tenselessly at earlier temporal co-ordinates than those which they occupy. Time's tooth gnaws away at our experience of life regardless of the purported tenseless existence of all events comprising one's life. For this reason, it would be futile to attempt to elude the force of this argument by postulating a temporal deity in a tenseless time.

However, the fact that this argument concerns, not temporal becoming itself, but our *experience* of temporal becoming, suggests another way round the argument. The fleetingness of our experience derives essentially from our confinement within the limits of our specious present, the subjective now-awareness of psychological time. The longer one's specious present, the less fleeting one's experience of life would be. If we could imagine someone who experienced a specious present which had the same duration as his entire life, such a person would experience his life all at once. These considerations have led William Alston to take up the view propounded by Royce [7] and Whitehead [8] that God's specious present has the same temporal extension as the whole of time, so that God has, indeed, at least experientially, complete possession all at once of interminable life. He writes,

just expand the specious present to cover all of time, and you have a model for God's awareness of

the world . . . a being with an infinite specious present would not, so far as his awareness is concerned, be subject to temporal succession at all. There would be no further awareness to succeed the awareness in question. *Everything* would be grasped in one temporally unextended awareness. [9]

This is also the solution which Grace Jantzen adopts in order to de-fang God's experience of time. Explaining that "In the specious present, we take up experiences which are objectively past into a whole with those which are still occurring . . .," she contends that a temporal God with an everlasting specious present could respond to the succession of events without having fleetingness of experience. [10]

Such a model would enable us to hold to God's being temporal and yet experiencing His entire life at once as a whole. Nevertheless, a little reflection reveals that this model exacts far too high a price for these benefits. This fact can be seen by examining the specious present in human experience. The reason we have a specious present is due to our physical limitations, particularly the finite velocity of the transmission of neural signals. Because we do not have instantaneous transmission of such signals, there is a minimum threshold of the psychological present, so that events which occur with a rapidity above a certain limit cannot be experienced by us as consecutively and discretely present. At most we can apprehend to a certain limit a succession of events within the psychological present. C. D. Broad has provided the following useful illustration of the specious present's gathering into successive now-awarenesses minimal, but non-zero, temporal intervals: [11]

Fig. 1. Each act of awareness on the part of *O* is of some sensible field of finite duration which is presented to *O* as now. Acts of awareness which are separated by intervals less than the length of the specious present have overlapping sensible fields.

In the case of a temporal God with an everlasting specious present, the temporal interval experienced as *now* expands to infinity:

Fig. 2. A temporal God with one everlasting specious present.

In this way God knows the temporal succession of all events within a single experienced present.

But such a model faces insuperable objections. (i) As unembodied Mind possessing maximal cognitive excellence, God should possess no minimal, finite psychological present at all, much less an infinitely extended one. He is not dependent upon finite velocity neural processes which would slow down His apprehension of present events. And being maximally excellent cognitively, we should rather expect that He be able to distinguish discrete, consecutive events as present rather than unable. As one commentator has remarked, a God with an everlasting specious present would be infinitely slow on the uptake! [12] In a literal sense, He would be mentally retarded. (ii) As Figure 2 above makes

evident, God would not experience His specious present until He had endured to the end of time. But then although God at that instant becomes aware of the succession of all events, it is too late for Him to do anything about them, for they are already past by that point. Thus, *contra* Jantzen, God could not respond to individual events in time. God's providence is therefore obliterated by such a model. Worse, God could not even know what He Himself had done throughout history until it was over. How He could act throughout history without any consciousness of what was happening at the time the events occurred remains a mystery. A sort of backward causation would seem to be necessary to explain God's acts in time. Since backward causation requires a tenseless view of time, this model would be invalidated should a tensed theory be shown to be preferable. Moreover, God's being temporal in tenseless time seems to imply a quasi-polytheism, since on the most plausible view of identity over time on such tenseless theories, God is a temporally extended object composed of temporal parts or stages; each of which is a different object and, hence, a different God. [13] If God is to be identified strictly with His maximal temporal stage (His everlasting part), then it follows that God is neither conscious nor does He act, since only His final temporal stage could be so capable. All these untoward consequences result if time in fact has an end. But if time has no end, as Christian doctrine of the afterlife teaches, then God *never* becomes conscious. There is no point at which all His cognitions of individual events can be gathered into a specious present, since there will always be time after that. Thus, the model becomes self-contradictory, for in order to have a specious present which takes in all of unending time, God's becoming conscious is indefinitely postponed such that He never has a specious present. (iii) It might be suggested that we loose the model from its physical and temporal foundations and interpret God's specious present merely on the *analogy* of our specious present. God just has at every point in time a specious present which takes in the whole of time (Figure 3).

Fig. 3. God does not acquire a specious present, but simply has the same specious present at every moment of time.

But as recent studies of indexical reference have shown, the ability to apprehend tenses is essential to timely action. If God has the same specious present at every moment of time, then He has neither memory nor foreknowledge nor changing now-awarenesses. Thus, He is rendered utterly impotent to act in a timely fashion, since He never knows what time it is. [14] On a tensed theory of time, God would undergo tense changes and temporal becoming but be utterly oblivious to these. Like Plantinga's Epistemically Inflexible Climber, [15] His cognitive awareness is fixated: at every time He experiences the whole ordered series of events as present. Unable to act in a timely way, God seems to be equally a victim of cognitive malfunction as the hapless climber. On a tenseless theory of time, God would never know at any time where He (or His temporal part) is located. Instead of a variety of now-awarenesses at different times, He has at each time the same now-awareness. Hence, He is

incapacitated to effect something at the time at which He is located or, barring causation at a (temporal) distance, any other time. In short, it seems to me that the theory of God's having an everlasting specious present is utterly inept and so affords no escape from the present argument.

Leftow himself discusses at considerable length an analogous model of what he calls quasi-temporal eternality, which might allow for a temporal God's complete possession of His life at once. [16] According to this theory, the whole, tenselessly existing temporal series of events is present. Just as on an atomic theory of time, chronons--finite intervals of time--are each present as a whole, so the whole extension of time is present as a whole. If this model is not to collapse into the specious present model above, it must be a tensed view of time, that is to say, time as a whole has the property of presentness. Unfortunately, Leftow seems to conflate the quasi-temporal model of eternity with tenseless time's being *experienced* by God as wholly present, that is, with the specious present view. On the view as I understand it, however, the whole of time is supposed to have objective, not merely psychological, presentness. Since, on this view, all of time is objectively present, God may experience it as such and so have His life all at once.

But such a theory seems altogether implausible. It requires us to break loose the *earlier/later than* relation from pastness, presentness, and futurity in such a way that events earlier and later with respect to each other can both actually be (not merely be experienced as) present. But if two events are both objectively present, how can one be earlier than the other? If it be said that they are earlier/later than each other respectively in virtue of being located at different times, though both times are present (unqualifiedly), has one not posited a hyper-time in which both times are present at the same hyper-time? And if there is only a single present comprising all times, then one must ask why the whole temporal series of events does not immediately elapse. Perhaps it does, the duration and successive lapse of time intervals being a subjective illusion of time-bound persons. But then God, as a temporal being, comes to be and passes away, which is absurd. If we say that the present of the whole of time does not elapse but endures, then we are back to the mistaken notion of eternity as presentness. If the present persists, then in what does it endure? The postulation of a tensed hyper-hyper-time in which the present of hyper-time endures seems the inevitable and unwelcome consequence. If we deny that the presentness of the whole time series elapses or endures, then it is not really presentness, and what we have here is the familiar tenseless theory of time according to which the entire temporal series just exists (tenselessly, not present-tensedly). Moreover, on the model under discussion, God, as a temporal being, can act in a timely fashion only if He knows what time it is or where He (or His temporal part) is located, but on this theory God, in order to have the whole of His life at once, must experience the objective presentness of the whole series of events, which renders timely action impossible. In short, this view of time and eternity is as implausible as the specious present view.

Perhaps, however, the realization that the current argument for divine timelessness is essentially experiential rather than ontological in character opens the door for a temporalist alternative. When we recall that God is perfectly omniscient and so forgets absolutely nothing of the past and knows everything about the future, then time's tooth is considerably dulled for Him. [17] His past experiences do not fade as ours do, and He has perfect recall of what He has undergone. To be sure, the past itself is gone, but His experience of the past remains as vivid as ever. A fatal flaw in Leftow's analysis is his assumption that God, like the widower, has actually lost the persons He loves and remembers. But according to Christian theism, this assumption is false. Those who perish physically live on in the afterlife where they continue to be real and present to God. At worst, what are past are the experiences God has enjoyed of those persons, for example, Jones's coming to faith. But in the afterlife Jones lives on with God, and God can recall as though it were present His experience of Jones's conversion. So it is far from obvious that the experience of temporal passage is so melancholy an affair for an omniscient God as it is for us. Indeed, there is some evidence that consciousness of time's flow can actually be an enriching experience. [18] R. W. Hepburn cautions against downplaying the importance of the flow of consciousness in awareness of music, for example. Music appreciation is not merely a matter of apprehending tenselessly the succession of sounds. Quoting Charles Rosen to the effect that "The movement from past to future is more significant in music than the movement from left to right in a picture," Hepburn believes that the phenomenon of music calls into question any claim that a perfect mode of consciousness would be exclusively atemporal.

Still, I think that we must admit that the argument has some force and could motivate justifiably a doctrine of divine timelessness in the absence of countermanding arguments. The question then will be whether the reasons for affirming divine temporality do not overwhelm the argument for divine timelessness.

Footnotes:

[1]

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

[2]

Ibid.

[3]

Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Prophecy, Past Truth, and Eternity," *Philosophical*

Perspectives 5 (1991): 395; cf. idem, "Eternity, Awareness, and Action," *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992): 463.

[\[4\]](#)

This emerges with special clarity in Brian Leftow, "Timelessness and Divine Experience," *Sophia* 30 (1991): 49: "there is a negative value to sequential experience as such: it makes possible loss of experience and experience of loss. . . . If it is bad to suffer this loss (as it is at least sometimes), it would be better not to suffer it;" but "A timeless God who experiences the whole of time has all His experiences at once and so experiences the whole of time at once . . ." (Ibid., p. 50).

[\[5\]](#)

H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (New York: Berkeley Publishing, 1957), p. 10. Cf. Hermann Weyl's remark, "The objective world simply *is*, it does not happen. Only to the gaze of my consciousness, crawling upward along the life-line of my body, does a section of this world come to life as a fleeting image in space which continuously changes in time" (H. Weyl, *Philosophy of Mathematics and Natural Science* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949], p. 116). Of course, the "passing along" and "crawling upward" have reference to our *experience* of time's flow; contrary to Wells, psychological time passes at various rates.

[\[6\]](#)

Letter of Albert Einstein, March 21, 1955, cited in *Albert Einstein: Creator and Rebel*, by Banesh Hoffmann with Helen Dukas (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1972), p. 258.

[\[7\]](#)

Josiah Royce, *The World and the Individual*, 2 vols. (1901; rep. ed.: New York: Dover, 1959), 2: 140-145.

[\[8\]](#)

A.N. Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), p. 68. For discussion see Bowman L. Clarke, "God as Process in Whitehead," in *God and Temporality*, ed. Bowman L. Clarke and Eugene T. Long (New York: Paragon House, 1984), pp. 180-184; James F. Harris, "An Empirical Understanding of Eternality," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 22 (1987): 165-183; Eugene Thomas Long, "Temporality and Eternity," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 22 (1987): 185-189.

[\[9\]](#)

William P. Alston, "Hartshorne and Aquinas: A Via Media," in *Existence and Actuality*, ed. John B. Cobb, Jr. and Franklin I. Gamwell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 91. In all fairness to Alston, it must be admitted that he is using the specious present as "an intelligible model for a *nontemporal* knowledge of a temporal world" (p. 90, my emphasis).

[\[10\]](#)

Grace M. Jantzen, *God's World, God's Body*, with a Foreword by John MacQuarrie (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1984), p. 65.

[\[11\]](#)

C.D. Broad, *Scientific Thought*, International Library of Psychology, Philosophy, and Scientific Method (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1923), p. 349.

[\[12\]](#)

Paul Fitzgerald, "Relativity Physics and the God of Process Philosophy," *Process Studies* 2 (1972): 267. Fitzgerald goes on to say, "This makes God out to be a sort of infinitely sluggish observer of the passing scene Contrary to what appears at first, it is a defect rather than a merit to have a specious present which is all inclusive."

[\[13\]](#)

See the discussion of endurance and perdurance in Trenton Merricks, "Endurance and Indiscernibility," *Journal of Philosophy* (forthcoming).

[\[14\]](#)

This is evident in Harris's description of God's experience on such a model: "God's experience of transient nature is infinite and instantly integrated and organized in a single, indivisible present moment. It is as though the entire universe is grasped in a single, infinite Gestalt organization where each part is 'seen' in its relation to other parts and the whole" (James F. Harris, "God, Eternality, and the View from Nowhere," in *Logic, God, and Metaphysics*, Studies in Philosophy and Religion 15 [Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992], p. 77).

[\[15\]](#)

Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: the Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 82. Due to

a cognitive malfunction, the climber's belief that he is seated on a ledge on Guide's Wall becomes fixed, no longer responsive to changes in experience.

[\[16\]](#)

Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, chap. 6.

[\[17\]](#)

A point defended by Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. ; Keith Ward, *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), p. 162.

[\[18\]](#)

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