

Timelessness and Omnitemporality

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SUMMARY

How shall we construe divine eternity and God's relationship to time? The view that God is simply timeless faces two insuperable difficulties: (1) an atemporal deity cannot be causally related to the temporal world, if temporal becoming is real, and (2) timelessness is incompatible with divine omniscience, if there are tensed facts about the world. On the other hand, we have good reasons to think that time and the universe had a beginning. Therefore, God cannot be infinitely temporal in the past. Perhaps we could say that God sans the universe existed in a topologically amorphous time in which temporally ordered intervals could not be distinguished. But such a state is not different from a state of timelessness. Therefore, the best understanding of eternity and time is that God is timeless sans creation and temporal since creation.

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Divine Relations with the World

Given that a temporal universe exists, we need to ask whether God can remain untouched by its temporality. It is very difficult to see how He can. Imagine God existing changelessly alone without creation, but with a changeless determination of His will to create a temporal world with a beginning. Since God is omnipotent, His will is done, and a temporal world comes into existence. Now this presents us with a dilemma: either God existed prior to creation or He did not. Suppose He did. In that case, God is temporal, not timeless, since to exist prior to some event is to be in time. Suppose, then, that God did not exist prior to creation. In that case, without creation, He exists timelessly, since He obviously did not come into being along with the world at the moment of creation.

This second alternative presents us with a new dilemma: once time begins at the moment of creation, either God becomes temporal in virtue of His real relation to the temporal world or else He exists just as timelessly with creation as He does without it. If we choose the first alternative, then, once again, God is temporal. But what about the second alternative? Can God remain untouched by the world's temporality? It seems not. For at the first moment of time, God stands in a new relation in which He did not stand before (since there was no "before"). Even if in creating the world God undergoes no intrinsic change, He at least undergoes an extrinsic change. For at the moment of creation, God comes into the relation of sustaining the universe or, at the very least, of co-existing with the universe, relations in which He did not stand before. Thus, even if it is not the case that God is temporal prior to His creation of the world, He nonetheless undergoes an extrinsic change at the moment of creation which draws Him into time in virtue of His real relation to the world.

This argument can be summarized as follows:

1. God is creatively active in the temporal world.
2. If God is creatively active in the temporal world, God is really related to the temporal world.
3. If God is really related to the temporal world, God is temporal.
4. Therefore, God is temporal.

This argument, if successful, does not prove that God is essentially temporal, but that if He is a Creator of a temporal world--as He in fact is--, then He is temporal.

Classical attempts like Aquinas's to deny that God is really related to the world and contemporary attempts like those of Stump, Kretzmann, and Leftow to deny that God's real relation to the world involves Him in time all appear in the end to be less plausible than the premisses of the argument itself. It seems that in being related to the world God must undergo extrinsic change and so be temporal.

Divine Knowledge of Tensed Facts

God's real relation to the temporal world gives us good grounds for concluding God to be temporal in view of the extrinsic change He undergoes through His changing relations with the world. But the existence of a temporal world also seems to entail intrinsic change in God in view of His knowledge of what is happening in the temporal world. A being which knew only tenseless facts about the world, including which events occur (tenselessly) at any date and time, would still be completely in the dark about tensed facts. He would have no idea at all of what is now going on in the universe, of which events are past and which are future. On the other hand, any being which does know tensed facts cannot be timeless, for his knowledge must be in constant flux, as the tensed facts known by him change.

Thus we can formulate the following argument for divine temporality:

1. A temporal world exists.
2. God is omniscient.
3. If a temporal world exists, then if God is omniscient, God knows tensed facts.
4. If God is timeless, He does not know tensed facts.
5. Therefore, God is not timeless.

So in addition to the argument from God's real relation to the world, we now have a second powerful reason based on God's changing knowledge of tensed facts for thinking that God is in time.

A Way Out for Advocates of Divine Timelessness?

It would seem, then, that we should conclude with Nick Wolterstorff that God is temporal. But there does remain one way of escape open for defenders of divine timelessness. The argument based on God's real relation to the world assumes the objective reality of temporal becoming, and the argument based on God's omniscience assumes the objective reality of tensed facts. If one denies the objective reality of temporal becoming and tensed facts, then the arguments are undercut. In short, the defender of divine timelessness can escape the arguments by embracing the static or tenseless theory of time. But this represents a very unpalatable route of escape, for the static theory of time faces formidable philosophical and theological objections, not to mention the arguments which can be offered on behalf of a dynamic theory of time. I, therefore, prefer to cast my lot with the dynamic theory. And it is noteworthy that almost no defender of divine timelessness has taken this escape route. Virtually the only person who appears to have done so is Paul Helm. On his view there is no ontological difference between the past, present, and future. Helm thus appears to be the one advocate of divine timelessness who has seen and taken the way out. But it is a hard and lonely road.

Timelessness and Omnitemporality

Given a dynamic theory of time, it follows from God's creative activity in the temporal world and His complete knowledge of it that God is temporal. God quite literally exists now. Since God never begins to exist nor ever ceases to exist, it follows that God is omnitemporal. This might seem to imply that God has existed for infinite time in the past and will exist for infinite time in the future. But what if the temporal world has not always existed? According to the Christian doctrine of creation, the world is not infinite in the past but was brought into being out of nothing a finite time ago. Did time itself also have a beginning? Did God exist literally before creation or is He timeless without the world?

There is an old problem which bedevils proponents of an infinite, empty time prior to creation, namely: Why did God not create the world sooner? On a relational view of time, time does not exist in the total absence of events. Hence, time may begin at the moment of creation, and it is imply maladroit to ask why God did not create the world sooner, since there is no "sooner" prior to the moment of creation. Time comes into existence with the universe, and so it makes no sense to ask why it did not come into being at an earlier moment. But if time never had a beginning, God has endured through an infinite period of creative idleness up until the moment of creation. Why did He wait so long?

This problem can be formulated as follows (letting t represent any time prior to creation and n some finite interval of time):

1. If the past is infinite, then at t God delayed creating until $t + n$.
2. If at t God delayed creating until $t + n$, then He must have had a good reason for doing so.
3. If the past is infinite, God cannot have had a good reason for delaying at t creating until $t + n$.

4. Therefore, if the past is infinite, God must have had a good reason for delaying at t and God cannot have had a good reason for delaying at t .

5. Therefore, the past is not infinite.

We thus seem to have a good argument for denying the infinity of the past and holding to the beginning of time. But now we are confronted with an extremely bizarre situation. God exists in time. Time had a beginning. God did not have a beginning. How can these three statements be reconciled? If time began to exist--say, for simplicity's sake, at the Big Bang--, then in some difficult to articulate sense God must exist beyond the Big Bang, alone without the universe. He must be changeless in such a state; otherwise time would exist. And yet this state, strictly speaking, cannot exist before the Big Bang in a temporal sense, since time had a beginning. God must be causally, but not temporally, prior to the Big Bang. With the creation of the universe, time began, and God entered into time at the moment of creation in virtue of His real relations with the created order. It follows that God must therefore be timeless without the universe and temporal with the universe.

Now this conclusion is startling and not a little odd. For on such a view, there seem to be two phases of God's life, a timeless phase and a temporal phase, and the timeless phase seems to have existed earlier than the temporal phase. But this is logically incoherent, since to stand in a relation of earlier than is by all accounts to be temporal. How are we to escape this apparent antinomy?

Strictly speaking, our argument for the finitude of the past did not reach the conclusion, "Therefore, time began to exist." Rather what it proved is that there cannot have been an infinite past, that is to say, a past which is composed of an infinite number of equal temporal intervals. But Padgett argues that in the absence of any measures, there is no objective fact that one interval of time is longer or shorter than another distinct interval. Prior to creation it is impossible to differentiate between a tenth of a second and ten trillion years. There is no moment, say, one hour before creation. Time literally lacks any intrinsic metric. God existing alone without the universe would thus not endure through an infinite number of, say, hours, prior to the moment of creation.

Such an understanding of God's time prior to creation seems quite attractive. Nevertheless, a close inspection of the view reveals difficulties. Even in a metrically amorphous time, there are objective factual differences of length for certain temporal intervals. For in the case of intervals which are proper parts of other intervals, the proper parts are factually shorter than their encompassing parts. But this implies that prior to creation God has endured through a beginningless series of longer and longer intervals. In fact we can even say that such a time must be infinite. The past is infinite if and only if there is no first interval of time and time is not circular. Thus, the amorphous time prior to creation would be infinite, even though we cannot compare the lengths of non-nested intervals within it. Thus, all the difficulties of an infinite past return to haunt us.

What must be done is to dissolve the linear geometrical structure of pre-creation time. One must maintain that "prior " to creation there literally are no intervals of time at all. There would be no earlier and later, no enduring through successive intervals and, hence, no waiting, no temporal becoming. This state would pass away, not successively, but as a whole, at the moment of creation, when time begins.

But such a changeless, undifferentiated state looks suspiciously like a state of timelessness! It seems to me, therefore, that it is not only coherent but also plausible that God existing changelessly alone without creation is timeless and that He enters time at the moment of creation in virtue of His real relation to the temporal universe. The image of God existing idly before creation is just that: a figment of the imagination. Given that time began to exist, the most plausible view of God's relationship to time is that He is timeless without creation and temporal subsequent to creation.