

# IS GOD TIMELESS? A REPLY TO LAURENCE WOOD

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I am grateful for the opportunity to reply to Laurence Wood's earlier article on the eternal nature of God.<sup>1</sup> A brief reply like this one necessarily focuses upon disagreements. I want to begin, therefore, with an affirmation: on the central themes of Christian theology, Dr. Wood and I are in agreement. I imagine this short note as a dialogue on something we disagree about: divine timelessness.

While his article takes aim at "open theism" and the work of Richard Swinburne, Wood also includes some discussion of my own work, as well as that of other philosophers and scientists. I believe it is important for our readers to gain a clear understanding of the alternative viewpoints available to them with respect to the doctrine of divine eternity, and of divine omniscience. This will require not only setting out the several options available, but correcting Wood's presentation of things in a few places where I believe he is mistaken in his analysis. I will focus on two large areas of disagreement: (1) theories of eternity and omniscience, and (2) the interpretation of relativity theory.

## I. THEORIES OF DIVINE FOREKNOWLEDGE AND ETERNITY.

At the very start of his article, Wood switches easily—rather too easily—between divine eternity and divine omniscience. These are distinct doctrines, and should not be confused or simply lumped together even when we are investigating their undoubted conceptual connections. There are at least three theories of divine eternity, and four main views of divine foreknowledge. Even these do not exhaust all the options. Yet Wood's essay reads as if our only choices were between a traditional view and Open Theism. These are not the only theories. I for one reject them both, as do other experts in this field such as William Lane Craig.

The three main doctrines of eternity are the traditional doctrine of absolute

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timelessness; the biblical view of everlasting eternity; and the view I have defended, called "relative timelessness." The third view, relative timelessness, is a difficult one to understand. According to this theory God is temporal in some sense, yet also transcends in some ways our space-time universe. I reject the traditional view of timeless eternity, as does Swinburne and Craig, for powerful philosophical reasons that Wood overlooks in his article. To be brief, the traditional view of divine eternity is incoherent with a theology of a living God, and a philosophy of time in which time is dynamic (that is, a process theory of time) Wood makes it clear that he accepts the process or dynamic theory of time in a long footnote at the end of his article (p. 46 n. 254). Now Wood believes in a living God, who is active in history. Therefore, I submit that Wood's view of divine eternity (which is similar to that of Boethius) is incoherent. In other words, the belief that past, present and future are real ontological differences, and the belief that all of the past, present and future are present to God in a timeless eternity, along with the belief that God acts in history: these three beliefs cannot all be true. They are logically inconsistent. This at least is the conclusion I reached in my 1992 study, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, and I have found no reason to change my mind in the last decade. It is this incoherence which Wood needs to address if he is really to defend Boethius against modern critics. Unfortunately, these arguments are never mentioned in his article.

Turning to the doctrine of omniscience: the theories of divine foreknowledge are divided into two camps.<sup>2</sup> Some philosophers and theologians (like Swinburne) argue for a limited divine foreknowledge. On this view, even God cannot know the full reality of future free and contingent events. The other camp contains all those who believe God does have full foreknowledge. They differ, however, as to *how* God knows the future. Their disagreement is about the mode of divine foreknowledge. For some theologians, God's foreknowledge is based upon his timeless eternity. This is Wood's view, and is also the view of Boethius. For others, God's foreknowledge is based upon God's will, that is, upon God's predestination. This would be a Calvinist view. Finally, some philosophers today argue for *scientia media*, a "middle knowledge" on the basis of which God knows all future events. This view was first put forward by Luis de Molina in the seventeenth century, and is known as Molinism. So there are several theories about just how God does know future free and contingent events.

Given this diversity of viewpoints, I object to Wood's claim that my theology has "no conceptual tools to explain how" God can know the future (p. 45). There are more options than Wood's notion of divine timelessness as the basis for God's foreknowledge. Plenty of excellent philosophers and theologians have rejected Wood's view of timeless divine eternity, and still held on to divine foreknowledge of all future events.

## II. RELATIVITY THEORY AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF TIME.

There are a number of philosophical issues in Wood's article having to do with the interpretation of modern physics. Much of what he says is correct, but his interpretation is one-sided. Once again, there exists a diversity of viewpoints which Wood failed to explicate in his essay. He assumes that only one philosophy of time is consistent with modern physics, but in his remarks he draws upon two conflicting viewpoints. Let me explain this a bit further.

While all philosophers of time today want to take seriously the results of modern physics, there are still two main camps with respect to the reality of past, present, and future. One camp, variously known as the B-theory, "tenseless" time, or the stasis theory of time, argues that past, present and future are purely subjective or mind-dependent. For the stasis theory, time is real as before-and-after or as a physical measurement, but temporal process is not part of objective reality. On the other hand, several scientists and philosophers argue for a dynamic or process theory of time. For them, even while the measure of time is relative, there is a genuine ontological distinction between past, present, and future. The flow of time is not merely subjective.

Both of these theories are consistent with modern physics. Wood appears to believe that there is only a choice between Newton and Einstein, as if the General Theory of Relativity leads automatically to the stasis theory of time. Such an assumption is unjustified. I object to the statement made by Wood that "Padgett misunderstands the implications of relativity theory" (p. 46 n. 253) simply because I have argued against the viewpoint he prefers. My main publications on this topic, and the arguments I make, are neither discussed nor cited.<sup>3</sup> Further, Swinburne and Craig have written even more on this topic than I have, yet their books are not discussed or even mentioned in a footnote.<sup>4</sup> It is unfortunate that an essay which claims that Swinburne's views are "inconsistent with relativity physics and the big bang singularity" (p. 5) nowhere mentions his major books on just these topics.

Swinburne's philosophy is fully consistent with modern physics, as his own work makes abundantly clear. I would make the same claim for my viewpoint, which makes no sense apart from relativity theory. In other words, not every scientist who is an expert in relativity theory will agree with Wood. To take a very recent example, the Oxford physicist Peter E. Hodgson has just published an explanatory article on "Relativity and Religion: The Abuse of Einstein's Theory."<sup>5</sup> He concludes his article with this observation: "It does make sense to talk of absolute time, and it may be possible to identify an absolute frame of reference. There is a real difference between past and future" (p. 409). If Hodgson is right, then Wood is wrong. What may have happened is this: Wood has been misled by the writings of some scientists, who confuse their preferred *interpretation* of physics with physics itself.

This leads me to my final question: which viewpoint does Wood accept, the process or the stasis theory of time? He takes ideas from both camps, but they cannot both be true. Either time travel is really possible according to the "law [sic] of relativity" (p. 30), and our common sense notions of time and simultaneity have been "destroyed" by modern relativity theory [stasis theory]; or else past, present and future are real ontological distinctions and not just mental experiences [process theory]. Either the process or the stasis theory of time is true: but not both. They contradict each other with respect to the ontological reality of temporal process (past, present and future). Wood wants to claim that "both perceptions are true to the facts" (p. 31) but that is not possible. If God sees and acts timelessly upon all times (past, present, and future); if all events occur "at once" in eternity no matter when they occur within time, then either we are speaking nonsense or the stasis theory of time is being assumed.

Even in this brief reply, we have discovered the complexities of contemporary debate

concerning divine foreknowledge and omniscience. It is not the case that the views of Boethius have been overlooked. Rather, his theory has been considered, debated, and rejected by many philosophers and theologians. While some scholars seek to defend Boethius (notably Brian Leftow), one cannot justly claim that his notion of timeless divine eternity has been ignored by either Swinburne or myself.

## NOTES

1. L. W. Wood, "Does God Know the Future? Can God Be Mistaken?: A Reply to Richard Swinburne," *Asbury Theological Journal* 56 (2002), 5-48. Page numbers in the main text are to this article.

2. See further the helpful introductory volume, *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, ed. James Beilby and Paul Eddy (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001). In my list of four views, I have not included "simple foreknowledge" which does not specify how God knows the future.

3. For my work on these topics, see *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time* (1992: Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001); "Divine Foreknowledge and the Arrow of Time: On the Impossibility of Retrocausation," in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. G. E. Ganssle and D. W. Woodruff (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 2001); "Eternity and the Special Theory of Relativity," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 33 (1993), 219-229. These works are summarized in my contribution to Gregory Ganssle, ed., *God and Time: Four Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Pr., 2001). Wood does cite the latter two publications.

4. See R. G. Swinburne, *Space and Time*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1981); Swinburne, ed., *Space, Time and Causality* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983); and his discussion of Big Bang cosmology in *The Existence of God*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1991). For William Lane Craig, see his massive, four-volume study: *God, Time and Eternity* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2001); *Time and the Metaphysics of Relativity* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001); *The Tensed Theory of Time* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000); and *The Tenseless Theory of Time* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000).

5. Peter E. Hodgson, "Relativity and Religion," *Zygon* 38 (2003), 393-409.