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God and Time: Relative Timelessness Reconsidered

ALAN PADGETT

Written on the topic of God and time, this chapter first introduces the notion of “relative timelessness” which the author has been developing for some time. This model of divine eternity is neither the traditional view of absolute timelessness, nor the other standard model of God’s everlasting existence “in” time. Instead, borrowing from modern physics, God is seen as timeless *relative to* the created space-time universe, in that God’s time or eternity is not connected to space, is not created in the beginning and has no ending, and cannot be measured by the temporal metric of scientific time. Other scholars have called this view “omnitemporality.” After discussing this viewpoint, the chapter speaks of ways in which the author’s theories have developed in recent years, especially in critical conversation with William Lane Craig.

This third chapter continues the conversation between religion and science. Here I provide a focused example of the mutuality of theology and science, and continue my long interest in questions surrounding God and time. As in the previous chapter, our focus is on the concept of God in Western theism. This time our topic is time in both physics and theology, and we will discover once again that this requires some alteration both in our view of God and in some interpretations of relativity theory. The topic of God, time, and eternity allows for some alteration and revision on the part of both religion and our interpretation of physics. True, the relationship between God and time may seem an obscure subject to some. Yet the more one studies it, the more convinced one becomes that this doctrine plays a key role in our grasp of the relationship between God and the world. I personally have been fascinated by this subject for several decades of my life, involving as it does physics, philosophy, and theology. How we understand God’s relationship to the world, in turn, is a central part of any theistic worldview. So despite the seeming obscurity of the topic, the doctrine of divine eternity is an important part of any fully developed theism.

In this chapter I will consider the difference the act of creation and continuing creating makes to our understanding of God’s eternity. I begin with developing a model I have been exploring for many years. This is the theory that God’s eternity is *relatively* timeless, borrowing the term “relative” from modern physics, especially relativity theory. I will also set

forth the ways in which my thinking has changed since 1989 when I finished by doctoral work at Oxford and later published *God, Eternity, and the Nature of Time*.¹ Because this third viewpoint of relative timelessness is still new to many philosophers and theologians, even those who work on the topic of time and eternity, I will take a few moments to review the evidence and arguments that led me to this conclusion and sketch out the basic viewpoint.

What is Relative Timelessness?

Normally scholars distinguish between two views of the relationship between God and time, the everlasting model (sometimes called “sempiternal”) and the absolute timelessness or atemporal model. As we know, the debate has been framed historically between these two views, with problems being pointed out for each position by its opponent. For some time now I have been promoting an alternative model: God is timeless *relative* to the created space-time cosmos, but also in some ways temporal. With respect for the great doctors of the Church in the past, I have found neither the everlasting nor the atemporal models finally satisfactory. I have promoted a third alternative which one hopes preserves key insights from both of the traditional views.

The basic picture of relative timelessness is this:

- (1) God’s time is infinite and immeasurable. Because they are involved in created frames of reference and depend upon stable laws of nature, measured time words like “day” or “week” do not properly apply to eternity. All points of our created time are simultaneous with some points of God’s eternity, but our space-time universe does not *measure* God’s infinite temporality.
- (2) God’s life is in no way defective or undermined by the passage of time. God is the Lord of time, not its prisoner.
- (3) Because God is a dynamic and changing being, God is still temporal in some sense: God is immutable in essence, but changing in interrelationship with the world and with us. Because God is a changing being, God has to be temporal to some degree. For this reason there are intervals within God’s life, but those intervals have no specific or intrinsic temporal measure.

This viewpoint has recently been adopted and modified by Gary DeWeese under the name “omnitemporality.”² I am happy to accept that as another way of talking about this third model.

Having introduced this third perspective, we turn to alternative viewpoints on divine eternity and survey some of their problems.

The Biblical Witness

Over recent decades I have moved more fully into the discipline of Christian doctrine (i.e., systematic and moral theology). I have come to appreciate more than I did before the importance of allowing Biblical theology and the Biblical narrative of God, creation, Israel, Jesus, and the early Church to give a decisive shape to the doctrine of God. What is

important here is not only the words used for eternity in the Bible, or even the isolated sayings about God and time, but also the character of God in the Biblical story. When we put together all of these kinds of sources, it becomes quite clear that the Christian Bible presents us with a view of God in which God is not absolutely timeless but rather eternal in the sense of everlasting. Psalm 90:2 is a good example: "Before the mountains were born, and You gave birth to the earth and world, from eternity to eternity You are God." The Hebrew word for "eternity" here (*olam*) means a long period of time (not a timeless eternity) and is often translated as "everlasting." This is consistent with the narratives concerning God and Israel or the Church. For example, the prophet Isaiah (speaking for God) proclaims: "I the Lord, the first and the last, I am He" (Isaiah 41:4). A God who exists from the first to the last is an everlasting Lord, not a timeless one. This is the viewpoint of the vast majority of Biblical scholarship, especially since Oscar Cullmann's important monograph, *Christ and Time* (French original, 1962). For this reason as a Christian theologian I believe that the everlasting model is the one we should begin with in thinking about God and time in the discipline of systematic theology. We need reasons to modify this view. The classical tradition has long provided such reasons, of course, but they did not always begin with the priority of the Scriptures and historical reality of Jesus Christ for the doctrine of God, the way many contemporary theologians (I among them) think we should.

My friend and esteemed colleague William Lane Craig, one of the world's great experts on time, eternity, and the nature of God, has recently argued that the Bible is more ambiguous on this topic than one might think at first glance.³ He sees the Biblical teaching of *creatio ex nihilo* as setting up or implying an absolute beginning to time. I do agree with Craig that creation out of nothing is a Biblical doctrine. There is good support for the doctrine of creation out of nothing in passages like 2 Maccabees 7:25, Romans 4:7 and Hebrews 11:3 (cf. 2 Enoch 24:2). What I cannot agree with is that creation out of nothing is taught in Genesis 1. Even if we read the opening sentence of the Bible as an independent sentence which makes a kind of title for the whole section, and not as a temporal clause as some Bible translations have it, verse 1 does not itself teach creation out of nothing (*contra* Copan and Craig).⁴ The presence of a formless waste and the waters of the deep lead to the conclusion that this chapter is teaching a creation out of chaos, as almost all academic exegetes will agree. Old Testament scholar Terry Frethiem writes, "The word beginning probably does not refer to the absolute beginning of all things, but to the beginning of the ordered creation, including the temporal order."⁵ The evidence for a creation out of *nothing* in Genesis 1 is too weak to support Craig's conclusions. What we might find in the text of Genesis 1, and its seven-day creation, is the beginning of ordered time or measured time. As J. Edward Wright puts this, "with Gen. 1 cosmic time and historical time begin."⁶ That the Biblical text implies an absolute beginning to time itself, that is, to metaphysical time or pure duration, is a conclusion which goes beyond the Biblical data. This point about Genesis 1 which we must press against Craig does introduce an important distinction: the difference between (1) measured time, that is cosmic or physical time, the time of science, clocks, and calendars which does begin with the origin of the spacetime cosmos; and (2) metaphysical time or pure duration, which may not have any beginning at all.

The Bible does unambiguously point to a God who is temporal but also eternal (everlasting). The burden of proof for theologians should be on the side of a timeless God. So what are the problems with the everlasting viewpoint? We do seem to have some sense of the transcendence of God, requiring that He be outside of any merely created category. For example, we hold that God is beyond space or spaceless, and is infinite in Being while all

other things are finite. The main problem with the everlasting model is not logical consistency but theological inadequacy. Give our notion of God as an infinite, personal Creator, we would expect God to transcend time in some way. Merely knowing the future, and living forever, is not enough to satisfy this demand. Another important point is pressed by recent developments in physics. We would join with St Augustine and many others to insist that time in some sense is a created category, which came into existence with the physical universe. Space and time – or we had better say space-time – has a beginning, but God does not. Spacetime is warped by the presence of matter; but God is not. Thus God must be beyond time as we know it in science, at least in some way. This is a continuing problem for an everlasting view of eternity. I will argue that what we will call in general “physical time” began with the creation of the universe, and distinguish this from a metaphysical time: a time which can go by without change, without material things, and without laws of nature. This allows us to affirm that space-time had a beginning in time without thinking that metaphysical time had a beginning.

Problems with Timeless Eternity

What, then, of an absolutely timeless God, that is, what about the classical tradition of divine eternity as *totum simul*? Logically one problem with the classical view that keeps appearing is the attempt to write temporality back onto the being of the One who utterly timeless. This often happens when thinking of eternity as if all of time could actually be *at one time*. In the actual world both the reality of temporality and the process of becoming between things and events enters into the core being of created reality. When we abstract from this dynamic reality in mathematics and physics or in theology and philosophy, we can discover important truths but are leaving behind an essential part of the actual world. The standard classical model of all of time being “at once” before a timeless God leaves behind something important about the world God has created, namely, the dynamic character of time and history.

Recent philosophers, including our esteemed colleagues Eleonore Stump and Brian Leftow, have attempted to create a model of eternity that is consistent with the A-theory or dynamic theory of time. I do agree that the classical model of a timeless Creator and sustainer of the world is internally coherent, but only when we reject or abandon the dynamic theory of time for a stasis or B-theory. Some philosophers are willing to embrace this conclusion. As Katherine Rogers recently wrote, “[C]riticisms of the tenseless view of time are not powerful enough to necessitate abandoning the venerable tradition of an eternal God.”⁷ (1996, p. 408). Unlike some critics, I believe that the atemporal model is logically consistent, but only when one adopts a stasis theory of time can such a God interact with creation.⁸

Because a timeless God is alive, God’s life will have a timeless, “atemporal extensive mode of existence.”⁹ As was argued by John Duns Scotus in the Middle Ages, God’s being has “succession” only in a conceptual sense, not in a temporal one.¹⁰ But such a God will not be able to change in order to interact with a created, contingent world that comes into being and passes out of being, with the process or dynamic theory of time demands. The main difference between process and stasis (or A and B) theories has to do with temporal passage. Imagine a time, *T* in the far future, and an event *E* which (let us say) will certainly happen at *T*. If we take the combination, *E-at-T*, we can get a sense of the difference between the process and stasis views. For the stasis view, *E-at-T* is real always. Of course, *E* is not real

now, but then neither view thinks it is. Rather, the stasis view believes that *E* is always real *at T* (and only at *T*). The process theory, however, denies that *E* is always real at *T*. *E* is only fully real when *T* is *now*, when *T* is the present moment. Nothing is real-at-*T* unless *T* is present. Of course, on the process theory, you can contrast the abstract set of all things past, present, and future that will ever be real with illusions, myths, and other non-real things. But within that set, for the process view, only present things are fully real. Past things used to be real, and future things will be real. If this view of time is correct, then either a timeless God does the same thing forever, and cannot interact with time; or God must change somehow over time not merely in appearance but in reality. For the action of God sustains all things in their very being-in-becoming.

Some esteemed and learned philosophers, whose work deserves more careful analysis than I can give it here, have sought to avoid this conclusion. I am thinking especially of Eleonore Stump and Brian Leftow. They have sought to make coherent a timeless model of divine eternity with a dynamic theory of temporal passage. They want to press the point that God *coexists* with every moment of time while not becoming temporal himself. What we need, however, is not mere coexistence but a theory of direct divine action in which God acts upon and interacts with temporal things at moments which do not and *cannot* all exist at once. By thinking that past, present, and future things can somehow exist all at once, we do violence to the idea that reality is fully temporal. Only present things are fully real; past things used to be real and future things will be real. Past and future are not fully real, and to think they are is to abstract from and leave behind a key element of created existence in the actual world.

What I am saying is that the very idea that that all times coexist timelessly with God in eternity is incoherent. First of all, things which exist in time cannot coexist timelessly. Nothing that is temporal can also be timeless. In the second place, all times cannot and do not coexist in any sense – and certainly not “timelessly” or “in eternity.” Different times are not all present, and only present things are fully real (on the process view). Therefore, they cannot coexist with present things.

The Special Theory of Relativity does not change this logical fact, but forces us to say, “present according to what system of measurement?” An event may be present in one system of measurement, but past in another. However, a timeless God does not have a system of measurement. God coexists with the true present, that is, the real moment of becoming, in the life of everything in the universe. If the physical universe as a whole is in the process of becoming (as the process theory demands), then so is each object (really existing thing) in it. Even a timeless God must await the future of any and all objects in the universe, in order to act directly upon future (nonexistent) episodes of that object. Thus a timeless God must do exactly the same thing forever, and cannot change to interact with a changing reality. This argument, of course, presupposes a process theory of time.

Defenders of God’s timeless being are often captured by a picture. This is a picture of God, high and lifted up, seeing all of time at once, in the way an observer on a high hill can see the whole of a road at once. The problem here is that only one step of the road exists, even for the observer. The typical abstraction of thinking about all events forever in space-time is just that: an abstraction. In reality, on the process theory, time is not like space. I have elsewhere given fuller consideration and critique of their theories, and cannot repeat all of that here.¹¹ Interestingly, John Duns Scotus considered similar ideas in his *Lectura* centuries ago, and rejected them, making the following comment: “If all future beings were present to God according to their actual existence, it would be impossible for God to cause them to

exist anew.”¹² Since timeless existence is so very different from temporal being, even if every event existed in God’s timeless “frame of reference” then God would have to re-create all events within the flow of temporal passage – which is absurd.

Just what is so bad with the stasis theory, then? If we have a strong attachment to atemporal eternity, can we not choose to hold on to a stasis theory of time? Here my only comment would be that we should allow philosophy of science and metaphysics to put forward the best theory. It is inappropriate for doctrinal theology or philosophy of religion to dictate in advance the conclusion that other sciences or disciplines must embrace. Coherence with other truths is an important criterion for any theory, including our theology of eternity. My own work in the philosophy of time has convinced me that the process theory of time is correct. Thus I cannot embrace the traditional model of timeless eternity. Of course I respect those who come to different conclusions, but I would argue with their metaphysical understanding of temporal reality.

Timelessness *Sans* Creation

Recently Craig has come up with an interesting twist on the traditional view that takes seriously the dynamic character of creation. His new view is that God is timelessly eternal before the first moment of creation and the first change (and here “before” must be a logical or causal before, not a temporal one). God then *becomes* a temporal being with the creation of time itself. I have a problem with this model, but thinking through Craig’s arguments has also forced me to change my mind in one respect which I will spell out later.

The problem I have with Craig’s model has to do with the necessary connections between time and change. Bringing all of the cosmos into existence at or soon after the first change is a decisive event in the history of God and of all existence. In order for this to happen, something has to change. For all eternity past, even before all creation, God is at least capable of changing in order to make reality *be* in the first place. This change cannot be attributed to the world, for the world did not yet exist back then. I have argued for some time that there is a necessary relationship between time and change. It is a principle that goes like this: necessarily, if change is possible for something then that thing is temporal in some way. Earlier I spelled out this relationship in a long argument involving modal counterfactual logic. I have since then come upon a much shorter argument which I would like to present here for the first time.

First I will propose as a principle of reason confirmed by experience the following proposition: without time nothing can change. Time and change are not the same thing, and time can possibly go by without any change happening. But when we imagine an infinitely thin slice of some event, on in which no duration, no temporal extension occurs at all, then change simply cannot happen at that instant. Change takes time to happen, and in fact some philosophers have gone so far as to define change as an entity having different properties at different times.

Yet we have not gone far enough yet. Where there is no duration, that is, no temporal extension of any kind, then change is not even possible. It is not just that as a matter of fact no change can happen in a durationless instant. It is metaphysically impossible for any change to take place. Imagine such an instantaneous time-slice of this colloquium. In that snapshot of time, nothing can change simply because change takes time. In that durationless instant change is not even possible.

One more modal point needs to be made. The principle I am speaking of does not just apply in the actual world. It is a necessary truth, flowing from the very idea of change itself. It applies in all possible worlds of necessity. This gets us to our first proposition. If we let x range across things or events, then:

(1) Necessarily, if a duration does not occur for X then change is not possible for X . In symbols this would be:

$$(1) \quad \Box[\sim D(X) \rightarrow \sim \Diamond C(X)]$$

Where D is a symbol for duration, and C for change. Now it's just *modus tollens* to get to the principle we want:

(2) Necessarily, if change is possible for X then a duration occurs for X .

Again, in symbols:

$$(2) \quad (1) \quad \Box[\Diamond C(X) \rightarrow D(X)]$$

Applying principle (2) to the case of God before the first change, that is, before creation, we get this truth: if God is even capable of change at all, then God is in some way temporal. When we reflect upon the very first change in the life of God, the momentous change of brining about the physical space-time universe in the beginning, that change belongs to God alone. So God must be capable of change for Craig, even without or before creation. Yet principle (2) means that God must still be temporal in some way even apart from creation, if it is even possible for God to change. Principle (2) is also the reason that I define metaphysical time as the dimension of the possibility of change.

While we should not accept Craig's viewpoint because of the problem I just outlined, we can go pretty far along with him. I now think that we should restrict the term "relative timelessness" to the non-finite eternity of God *before creation and before all change*. Before creation, although time does go by there was no change, that is, no alteration in the infinite being and blessed rest of the Triune God. There were no true intervals or metrics to mark off the passage of time: just pure duration, pure being without change. God only changes to bring about the first moment of physical time and of all creation with it. Once God does bring about a world, then things change for God as well as for creatures. What about God's eternity after creation? I would now accept the term "omnitemporal" from Gary DeWeese, in which God's time or eternity transcends physical time by being infinite and immeasurable. So I would change Craig's model only in this respect: before the first change, God is *relatively* timeless, and also contingently without change (but still capable of changing). With creation God becomes omnitemporal, entering into a relative change with us, while still being immutable in those essential properties which set off God as fully divine.

I have argued in this chapter that both of the traditional notions of eternity have their problems. In dialogue with Craig I have proposed a modified version of relative timelessness for divine eternity. Prior to creation, God is changeless and free of temporal measure or temporal decay, that is, *before creation God is relatively timeless*. After creation, God is essentially immutable but changes in relationship with a dynamic world of time. In other words, after creation God is *omnitemporal*. For all eternity God is in some ways

temporal, yet is never bound by time. Thus in dialogue with my colleagues and critics I have learned to alter my earlier position, and so develop and strengthen the notion of *relative* timelessness.

Notes

- 1 A. G. Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time* (London: Macmillan, 1992).
- 2 Gary DeWeese, *God and the Nature of Time* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004).
- 3 William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 14–20.
- 4 Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation out of Nothing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).
- 5 Terence Fretheim, “Genesis,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. L. E. Keck vol. 1. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), p. 342.
- 6 “Cosmogony, cosmology.” *New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. K. Sakenfeld, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), p. 755.
- 7 “Omniscience, eternity and freedom,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1996), 399–412, quoting p. 408. This is also found in her book, *An Anselmian Approach to God and Creation* (1997).
- 8 Padgett, *God*, 76–81.
- 9 Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Atemporal duration: A reply to Fitzgerald,” *Journal of Philosophy* 84 (1987), 215. Stump and Kretzmann later insisted that their language of a “timeless now,” a “timeless simultaneity,” and a “timeless duration” are meant to be analogies, in “Eternity, awareness and action,” *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992), 463–82, esp. 464f. Stump and Kretzmann use terms like timeless “duration”, timeless “now,” and timeless “simultaneity” because they wish to retain some aspects of the ordinary predicates. But why not use ordinary words when possible? Especially in specialist publications (like theirs), it is better to use ordinary terms in univocal predication, to avoid confusion and hasty conclusions. For example, if they had used “timeless coexistence” instead of “ET-simultaneity” in the publications, a great deal of confusion (and a few errors on their part) could have been avoided.
- 10 *Ordinatio* I, d.9 & d.43. This work is sometimes entitled *Opus Oxoniense*, but is called “Ordinatio” in the beautiful modern critical edition of Scotus, *Opera Omnia*, ed. C. Balic et al (1950–).
- 11 A. G. Padgett, “Eternity and the Special Theory of Relativity,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (1993), 219–23. Some of these same criticisms can be found in William L. Craig, “The Special Theory of Relativity and theories of divine eternity,” *Faith and Philosophy* 11 (1994), 19–37.
- 12 “Si omnia futura essent praesentia Deo secundum eorum actuaalem existentiam, impossibile esset Deo causare aliquid de novo.” *Lectura I* (in *Opera Omnia*, vol. 17), d. 39, q. 5, sec. 28 (p. 487). There is an English translation and commentary on this distinction, entitled *Contingency and Freedom*, trans. A. Vos Jaczn et al.

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