

Time Lost and Time Regained: A Short Essay on the Eternity of God

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ABSTRACT

In philosophy of religion and analytical theology there is a substantial debate about God's relation to time. The traditional, Christian theistic stance, championed by Boethius, Augustine, Aquinas, and others, is that God is timelessly eternal. This is opposed by Nicholas Wolterstorff, Richard Swinburne, and some other major philosophers of religion. Wolterstorff's objections to the traditional position were examined to bring to light how the critics of the belief that God is eternal fail to appreciate how the traditional stance is pitted against anthropomorphism. It affirmed the unique self-subsistence of God as Creator, and the goodness of temporality.

Keywords: *Anthropomorphism, eternity, God, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Richard Swinburne, temporality, time.*

And there are some who have no memorial,
who have perished as though they had not lived;
they have become as though they had not been
born,
and so have their children after them.

Sirach 44:9

Well! And what if she should die some
afternoon,

Afternoon grey and smoky, evening yellow and
rose;

Should die and leave me sitting pen in hand

With the smoke coming down above the
housetops....

T. S. Eliot, Portrait of a Lady

In analytical theology and philosophy of religion the debate over God's relationship to time is often suffused with highly technical arguments involving the concepts of causation, modality, future free contingents, the theory of relativity, the tensed nature of knowledge, comparisons of the so-called dynamic and static theories of time, and so on. It is more rare that philosophers and theologians attend to the root values that are in play in the classical literature on God and time that we find in Boethius, Augustine, Aquinas, and others. Such classical thinkers were not concerned only with the

metaphysical thesis that there is no past, present, and future for God, but with overriding divine values.

In this brief essay I use the work of Nicholas Wolterstorff as a foil to bring to light how the traditional belief that God is eternal is employed, historically, to underscore three important tenants: God is not to be thought of anthropomorphically; the life of God is unsurpassably full as the self-subsisting Creator; and every moment of time is precious, in part, because of God's eternity.

TEMPORALITY, A LIFE WORTH LIVING, AND CAUSATION

Consider first the case against the view that God is atemporally eternal. Wolterstorff's case against those who believe God to be temporal involves an appeal to human experience.

What's characteristic of those of us who live in time is that there are experiences we have had that are over, "irretrievably over and done with." We cannot "live them again." We may remember them with greater or lesser vividness. But as experiences, they are "forever lost." (Wolterstorff, 69)

Although Wolterstorff does not explicitly rule out the possibility of there being an eternal person (or, in light of the doctrine of the Trinity, there being three divine persons that are

atemporally eternal), he focuses his analysis of what it is to be like us. In our case, experiences must, by their very nature, become irretrievably lost as we live through time even if (perhaps per impossibile) we never lose consciousness.

“And if there be persons who need no sleep and for whom, accordingly, experiences can in principle last a long time, it will still be the case, even for enduring experiences, that parts of them will be over and forever lost. So... intrinsic to the experience of a person in time is that, at any moment in that person’s life, many of her life’s experiences have this quality of irrevocable overness”. (Ibid., 69)

Wolterstorff develops the following two thought experiment: if we imagine what it would be like to be a person who did not experience the overness of time, we wind up with bizarre results. In the first, we seem driven to absurdity; the idea that one’s experience would have to occur in a moment:

“What would be required for my life to be lacking in any experience that has the quality of irrevocable overness? It would at least have to be totally devoid of change. Would it have to be momentary? Strictly speaking, yes. For if it were not momentary, then a segment of it would be over at a certain time”. (Ibid., 73)

Although Wolterstorff does not press the issue, I suggest that such a thought experiment would amount to a reduction to absurdity. No one can think in an instant. An instant as opposed to an event or an interval, has no temporal magnitude; it is akin to a point in space which may be said to have location but not spatial extension.

In a second thought experiment, Wolterstorff conjures up the following case in which there is an irrevocable loss of the past, but this fact seems trivial and uninteresting.

“Suppose my experience is confined to that of seeing an unfaltering patch of vivid green. Yes, after ten minutes of this the first ten minutes would be over –irrevocably, irretrievably and all of that. But since my experience would continue to be more of exactly the same, surely there would be no cause for lament in the fact that the experience of the first ten minutes was forever lost.” (Ibid., 73)

So, Wolterstorff’s reasoning here is that a changeless being that does not experience temporal loss is either an absurdity (thinking, a process that requires temporal passage, in an instant) or not at all valuable.

“Wolterstorff’s most important, direct challenge to those who embrace God as eternal is that they seem to rob God of the capacity to enjoy temporal goods”.

“Now why would anyone imagine that unchanging experience, be it momentary or durational, is a more excellent form of life –or if you will, fuller than that which I do experience? Consider how little of what we actually experience could be gotten into a changeless state. Watching my children grow up would be something I could not experience, listening to a piece of music would be something I could not experience, walking through Hagia Sophia so as to see it from a variety of different angles would be something I could not experience, building a piece of furniture or designing a house would be something I could not experience, and so forth, on and on. To me it seems just bizarre to suppose that such a life would be more excellent, more full. It seems, on the contrary, appallingly impoverished”. (Ibid., 73)

How should we assess these considerations when it comes to the philosophy of God?

ETERNAL VALUES

The first point to note is that Wolterstorff’s reasoning concerns what he takes to be the “characteristic of those of us who live in time.” One may grant all his points; for us, thinking and acting are inconceivable without there being temporal sequence. For us to have and raise children, build things, explore Hagia Sophia, listening to music, and so on, requires sequential activity in which events transpire and the present moment is (as it were) in motion and not at all static or immutable (not subject to change). It is understandable that Wolterstorff, as a Christian philosopher, would use human life as a reference point for thinking about God in light of the belief that human persons are made in the image of God. But while one might rightly think that God, like human beings, loves, knows, creates, it is another matter to suppose that the manner or mode of God’s love, knowledge, and power is, like our own, temporal. The classical, eternalist tradition does not in any way claim that temporal changing and sequential activity is ipso facto defective. Such temporality is (arguably) essential for there to be a created order of free, interdependent agents who are profoundly responsible for each other’s welfare. Boethius, Augustine, Aquinas, and others

simultaneously affirm the goodness of a contingent creation and recognize what they see as the perfection of God, which involves God containing “all the plenitude of perfection of all being” --*omnem plenitudinem perfectionis totius esse* (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.9.1.) On this view, God’s greatness cannot be augmented or diminished. God is loving, knowing, and is revealed in time, but this is timelessly willed by a God who is not subject to time. On this point, the classical view may be appreciated as non-anthropomorphic, not modeling the conception of God based on human life (and its limitations). The examples of some of the goods that Wolterstorff lists as desirable, such as walking through Hagia Sophia, would only be available to God as an embodied, human-like being. The classical position is, therefore, less likely than the temporal model (God is in time) to be dismissed as a mere human projection as one finds in the classical and contemporary critics of theism, from Feuerbach to Dawkins.

A defender of divine eternity need not choose between speculating that God must act, love, and so on, in a temporal instant or as a dormant, homogenous consciousness. In the case of a being that is believed to transcend temporality such matters are as irrelevant as speculating about the spatial location of metaphysically necessary truths (2+2=4).

A second, related point about the traditional, eternalist tradition that Wolterstorff’s critique brings to light, is that the classic position makes central the thesis that the reality of God as creator of all that is, is part of God’s very essence. God is essentially substantial being (*esse substantiale*); God exists as being subsisting through itself (*ipsum esse per se subsistens*). So, unlike Wolterstorff, his children, our planet or our cosmos with its 200 billion (more or less) galaxies, God does not exist by virtue of the subsistence or causal force of anything external to God’s self. Like the observations made above, this exalted view of God further distances the concept of God from an anthropomorphic projection. But it also underscores the idea that the being (existence and continuation) of the created order stems from the divine nature and will.

Third, those advocating the classical position do so, not to diminish the goods that Wolterstorff

highlights, but to see them as more precious. Appreciating this may be done in three stages.

First, consider Wolterstorff’s raising children and building things (and so on) under conditions where there is no God, the cosmos is (eventually) annihilated and there is no memory of those acts by anyone or anything. We might even imagine that at a certain point in time there would be no trace of any kind of there once being purposive, living creatures. In this scenario we may well deem the good lives and acts to be truly valuable. Those who are Platonists might go so far as to contend that it will be forever true that there was a time when there were valuable lives and acts, even if there are no traces left from such things. But on this scenario, the impact and endurance of the goods at issue would be less than the following two thought experiments.

Second, imagine there is an all good Creator God who is temporal, who sustains the created order, and recalls all the acts and lives of all creatures, great and small, human and nonhuman; no good act goes unknown or unloved by this God. Setting aside speculation about an afterlife, this case seems to be one in which the goods that occur have a more enduring magnitude than the first, even if all living things perish.

Third, imagine that at all events that have occurred, are occurring and will occur there is an all good, eternal God who is fully present to and for each of these events. On this model, God timelessly sustains all moments of the created order from an eternal plane such that the reality of God in what we consider the past is not less real than the reality of God in the present or at any time in what for us is the future. In this third scenario, there is a difference between Wolterstorff’s example of a finite, temporal human being gazing at the same thing, and an eternal being apprehending from a timeless point of view all the successive, temporal stages of events that have, are, and will occur cosmically. An imperfect analogy would be to compare a person who is coming to know a theatrical drama as it unfolds scene by scene and a person knowing a drama from beginning to end and not just being able to be fully present at any point, but fully grasping all the details of the drama at once. Arguably, this third case offers us a kind of omni-temporal divine presence akin to God’s omnipresence in space. Just as divine omnipresence leads us to believe that all places

are graced by God's reality, God's eternity allows us to believe that all times are graced by God's reality. Even apart from questions about an afterlife for created persons, I suggest that this third model offers a richer account of God's comprehensive presence throughout time than the second model.

Consider two objections. First, so long as the acts Wolterstorff cites are "over and done with," why should either the second or third model make any difference in terms of the values (or disvalues) at stake? Imagine there is a car accident today, and several people are killed. Imagine further that virtually no one mourns their death, no one living recalls who they were, and so on. It seems that the accident is just as bad whether the victims are known or unknown. On reflection, though, we might even conclude that if there was great mourning and regret, the accident was worse for it not only ended the lives of (presumably) valuable individuals, it also led to enormous sorrow and regret.

Reply

The objection prompts an important distinction between the value of an event as a relatively independent, separable phenomenon and the value of the event in a greater context. The disvalue and loss of the accident and the goodness of Wolterstorff's acts are not affected by the more comprehensive context, but in such a larger context we can see that there is a tremendous magnification of disvalue and value. So, given the accident is mourned and persons missed by creatures, there is more sorrow in the cosmos and, given there is an all good, Creator-God who grieves the senseless loss of life, there is even greater sorrow. The reverse is true with created goods: there is a magnification of goods insofar as there is joy in such goods by creatures or the Creator.

Second Objection

So long as the advocate of divine eternity recognizes the reality of temporal sequences, she recognizes that the events of the past are "over and done with." What difference does it make if those past events are recalled by the divine mind with maximal clarity and accuracy (such that there is no truth about all such events that are not known) rather than all such past, present and future events are comprehended, comprehensively by the divine mind? It would seem that in either case, there would be the

same scope and magnitude of divine knowledge and love.

Reply

Those advocating the temporality of God (such as Wolterstorff and Richard Swinburne) usually contend that not even God knows what for us is the future free acts of creatures. From that position, the scope and magnitude of divine knowledge and love would differ between the models. In the classical model, God knows and loves you as you have been, are, and what will actually be your future. On the temporalist view, God may know all possible futures and have maximal love for created beings, but if, for example, the temporalist holds that what for us is the future is not knowable, then it follows that God might love and care for all you might be, but not do so knowing who you will be.

At the outset of this paper, a passage is cited from the Book of Sirach lamenting the way persons perish without memorial or tribute. And a passage from T.S. Eliot's poem "Portrait of a Lady" (first published in 1915) is cited in which the poet reflects on the mortality of someone he (perhaps with futility) yearns to foster an intimate relationship. If the tradition of God's eternity holds, then all the persons and relationships of what for us is in the past, present, and future, are known and loved by the permanent being (*esse permanentis*) of God (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.9.4).

This essay has intentionally been aimed at bringing to light questions about values that often are ignored in the standard literature about God's relationship to time. In particular I have noted how the critique of the view that God is eternal by Nicholas Wolterstorff fails to appreciate that the traditional position is profoundly anti-anthropomorphic; it stresses the unique self-subsistence of God; and, far from denigrating the good of a temporal creation, the belief that God is eternal is part and parcel of affirming the precious nature of temporal beings.

¹ This essay continuous with the project of *The Golden Cord* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2012) in which I seek to bring to light the important values that are in play in the Christian philosophical tradition addressing the eternity of God.

² I thank Arthur Cunningham and Alexander Cavender for reflection on God's relation to time, Summer 2017.

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