

Debunking The Hellenistic Myth: Why Christians Should Believe That God Is In Time

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1. God's relation to time: so what?

Ask a hundred Christians if they think that God is in time or outside time. Chances are that more people will locate God outside time than inside it. But it is also quite likely that many will have no clear idea about the topic. And I think it safe to suppose that the majority will deem the question to be of little relevance for their everyday lives.

In this essay I will try to convince you:

- (1) that the question of God's relation to time is of practical relevance for every believer
- (2) that the idea of God being outside time is a philosophically untenable concept which creates major clashes with Christian doctrine and therefore that every Christian should adopt some temporalist view of God

To do that, I will present four arguments against the "outside time" view of God. I then briefly treat the question where the idea of God's timelessness presumably came from and conclude with an outlook on problems that temporalist accounts of God must face.

I shall use the term "temporalist" for all views that locate God in time and the term "atemporalist" for all views that locate God outside time. I take it for granted that God exists without beginning and end. The corresponding terms for this aspect of God's existence are "everlasting" on a temporalist account and "eternal" on an atemporalist account¹.

2. Atemporalism endorses an abstract concept of God

The first problem is that atemporalism seems to entail an abstract God who resembles more an idea than a person. Timelessness seems to entail immutability (changelessness) and immutability seems to be in conflict with the personhood of God.

To see that timelessness entails immutability, consider Boethius's famous formula for the life of a timeless Godhead:

Eternity is the simultaneous and complete possession of infinite life. (Boethius 1902, Book V, 161)

Atemporalists take God's life to be *all at once*, i.e. not spread out through time, but *completely present* in the one eternal "moment". It seems clear to me that this entails immutability. Change requires a succession of moments; if there is but one moment in which all that God could possess is already there, no door is open for change in the Godhead.

In this respect it does not matter whether one construes God's atemporality as a point-like or an extended (duration-like) existence. Either way, everything that God is, knows or does is eternally simultaneously there.

But the roots of divine atemporality go even deeper. Atemporalists often, especially in the Middle Ages, derived divine immutability from divine simplicity. Divine simplicity means roughly that God is identical with his attributes². For example, Thomas Aquinas argues that divine simplicity entails God's immutability and his immutability entails his timelessness (Aquinas 2006) Ia 9, 1; 10, 2.). Divine simplicity clearly is the more basic doctrine; the mediaevals' belief in it at least partly explains their strong commitment to divine immutability.

If we take this connection of divine simplicity and immutability at face value, we seemingly have found the root of atemporalism. But it seems that the tree growing out of that root must bear foul fruits, for the root is foul. Divine simplicity implies a strange picture of God. For if God is identical with his attributes, this seems to suggest the bizarre conclusion that he just *is* a collection of *abstract attributes*. Actually, divine abstractness already appears on the level of immutability. Though it is logically possible that a living being just does not change, it is an utterly alien thought to us who know life only hand-in-hand with change. The only "things" we know to be without change are abstract ideas.

Against those arguments, an atemporalist will object that it is precisely God's "otherness" that distinguishes him from us and makes him God, the supreme being; all attempts to understand his nature in human or "anthropomorphic" terms are supposed to fail. This objection may obtain, for all I have said hitherto could show that divine immutability (entailed by his timelessness) makes God *appear* remote and abstract to us, not that he *is* remote and abstract. When we look at more practical issues, however, the problem of abstractness/remoteness, is exacerbated.

3. Atemporality is at odds with a natural understanding of petitionary prayer

Timelessness is at odds with a natural construal of petitionary prayer, because it denies the temporal succession of petition and answer.

One way to see this is simply this. Suppose I ask God at t_1 to heal my mother. At $t_2 > t_1$ he heals her in an instant. Naturally enough, I consider his answer as temporally later than my petition. But this view can only be true if God is in time. The answer can only be temporally later if God exists at t_1 and hears my prayer and then exists at t_2 and acts upon it. On an atemporal account, however, God exists *out of time*. Two questions arise here: (1) How can he interact with the world at all? (2) How can we understand the seemingly temporal succession of petition and answer?

The response to (1) must go something like this: God “sees” the whole of time *all at once* and performs his actions in the world *all at once*. This leads us seamlessly to an answer to question (2). It course means that my prayer and his answer happen for God *both at once*. There is no temporal or other succession at all!

It is really hard to see how one can still call this “petitionary prayer”. Stump & Kretzmann made the attempt to explicate it. They doubt that responses to prayers must occur later than the prayers:

If at 3:00 a mother prepares a snack for her little boy because she believes that when he gets home at 3:30 he will ask for one, it does not seem unreasonable to describe her as preparing the food because of the child’s request...consider the case of Hannah’s praying on a certain day to have a child and her conceiving several days afterward. Both the day of her prayer and the day of her conceiving are ET-simultaneous with the life of an eternal entity. If such an entity atemporally wills that Hannah conceive on a certain day after the day of her prayer, then such an entity's bringing it about that Hannah conceives on that day is clearly a response to her prayer, even though the willing is ET-simultaneous with the prayer rather than later than it.

ET-simultaneity is a concept developed by Stump and Kretzmann that gives an account of how two events (one eternal and one temporal one) can be simultaneous (Stump and Kretzmann 1981). Let’s assume, *arguendo*, that ET-simultaneity does give an answer to how an atemporal God can interact with a temporal world (which e.g. (Swinburne 1993) doubts). Even if it does, it still is at odds with our natural understanding of prayer. And it has a strange consequence. For not only would God know that Hannah prays and answers her prayer *eternally simultaneously*, but also would he be *sad* about Peninna bullying childless Hannah and *happy* about Hannah’s joy over her firstborn son *eternally simultaneously*. Defenders of divine simplicity would perhaps either deny that God has

such emotional states or hold that he has them all at once as part of his divine nature. But again, even if no contradiction can be derived from the atemporalist view here, the gritty aftertaste of an abstract God remains. After all, my prayer wouldn't change anything in an atemporal (and presumably simple) God, which makes God look lifeless, rather like an abstractum.

The aforementioned arguments should suffice to show that there is considerable tension between atemporalism and petitionary prayer naturally understood. The next argument suggests that for an atemporal God, it is impossible to know that I am "now" praying or that I have prayed to him yesterday.

4. Problems with divine knowledge of tensed facts

A third cluster of problems with atemporalism arises around God's knowledge of tensed facts. I will argue that an atemporal God cannot know tensed facts and that therefore his omniscience is defective and ceases to be omniscience, which in turn clashes with orthodox Christian teachings.

Tensed facts are facts that contain temporal information, e.g. "Doug plays tennis now" or "Martha went shopping yesterday between 5 pm and 8 pm" or "Harry will participate in the race next week". I deliberately chose those three examples because they represent present, past and future tense. Now for us there is no doubt that such propositions can constitute knowledge, at any rate present and past tense facts. We exist now and know of some things that they are happening now; we also know of some things that they have happened in the past and know of future things that they will (perhaps) happen. Yet an atemporal God does not exist *now* nor existed *earlier* nor will exist *in the future*; as pointed out in section 2, he has all of his existence in one eternal "now". Therefore, even if an he knows all the details of history, he knows them *all at once* and not in a temporal order. He would know "Doug plays tennis" and "Martha goes shopping between 5 and 8 pm", but Doug wouldn't be playing *now* for him nor would Martha for him have gone shopping *yesterday*.

This lack of knowledge constitutes a considerable deficiency in divine omniscience. Even if God need not know what is logically impossible to know, we rightly expect him to know tensed facts. The atemporalist has three options to deal with this demand: (1) either scratch tensed facts from the inventory of divine omnipotence, without argument, a dissatisfying move; (2) scratch tensed facts by arguing that on an atemporalist account, it is logically impossible for God to know tensed facts and therefore he need not know them. This argument, however is question-begging, because it presupposes what it set out to show, namely that it is reasonable to believe in an atemporal God; (3)

accept a less than omniscient God, which I assume no atemporalist wishes to do. As neither of these options seems desirable, I conclude that the problem of tensed facts at least exacerbates atemporalism's difficulties. But the most weighty argument is still to come.

5. Logical contradiction concerning the Incarnation

The summit of atemporalism's difficulties with Christianity lies in its clash with the doctrine of the Incarnation. Construing the Incarnation atemporally requires the logical contradiction that part of the Godhead *simultaneously has a human body and has no human body*.

According to the doctrine of Incarnation, some two thousand years ago God took on flesh and walked this earth as a man. One way to put the biblical account is as follows (let t_0 be the moment of Christ's conception in Mary's womb):

- (i) At all instants $t_m < t_0$, Christ existed as the second person of the Trinity without a human body.
- (ii) At moment t_0 , God took on a human body.
- (iii) At all instants $t_n > t_0$, Christ existed and continues to exist as the second person of the Trinity with a human body.

Temporalism has no problems at all accommodating the historicity of Christ's incarnation. A God that is located in time has a past, a present and a future. Let us go back to the time of Christ's incarnation: then t_0 is God's present. In that present, God is about to change in so far that the second person of the Trinity is about to take on human flesh. With respect to that present, God existed prior to it as a purely spiritual being. With respect to that present, God continues to exist in the future as a being of which one part has a body.

What about atemporalism? As there is no temporal succession for an eternal being, the states (i) through (iii) must all be eternally simultaneous for God. This is not only counterintuitive, but also entails a downright contradiction. Even an eternal being cannot have simultaneous states that are mutually exclusive. Either Christ has a body or he hasn't; on atemporalism, both states must be *eternally simultaneously* true, which is a contradiction.

Still, Stump and Kretzmann argue that God's atemporality is compatible with the historicity of the Incarnation. Their approach is based on the doctrine of the dual nature of Christ, according to which Christ eternally simultaneously possesses a divine and a human nature.

The doctrine of the dual nature maintains that the second person of the Trinity has not merely one essence or nature...but two: one the divine nature common to all the persons of

the Trinity, the other the human nature *of the Incarnation*. ((Stump and Kretzmann 1981), p. 452; emphasis added)

They go on to write that although Christ's divine nature cannot become temporal, "at some temporal instants...the human nature of the second person has been temporally actual." ((Stump and Kretzmann 1981), p. 453). I see two severe difficulties here.

First, even if we take Christ's human nature to be eternal, his having a body undoubtedly is a temporal thing. Whatever it means for Christ's human nature to be "actual", he cannot both have a body and not have it. Second, according to the New Testament, Christ's having a body is a continuing state. When he ascended to Heaven, he did so with his body; he shall return to earth as a bodily being³. One would have to include Christ's "incarnatedness" in the notion of his human nature to make it compatible with atemporalism. It goes without saying that this raises massive problems like the question how the Creator can eternally have, even partly, a created body. Furthermore, it would weaken, if not nullify our awe for Christ's condescension in becoming a man. Bible passages like Philippians 2:6-8 would become a sham. For how can we reasonably speak of Christ that he "emptied" and "humbled" himself by taking on human form, if he had that form eternally and therefore necessarily?

In summary: Christ's incarnation poses seemingly insuperable challenges for atemporalism. It seems that to maintain atemporalism, we would have to give up our traditional notion of Christ's Incarnation and opt for one that radically changes our concept of salvation.

6. Whence? Timelessness as a Platonic concept imposed on Christianity

Given the serious difficulties outlined above, why have so many philosophers and theologians endorsed the atemporal model?

Nicholas Wolterstorff ((Wolterstorff 1975), p. 78-79) lists two main factors, which I find most plausible:

(1) Temporal events are irrecoverable, which constitutes a matter of deep regret for humans; hence, God must be outside time, so that no event is irrecoverable to him, and no "tooth of time" gnaws at him.

(2) Hellenistic influences in early Christian theology. The idea that the eternal is superior to the temporal, even to the everlastingly temporal, is found in Plato; although Plato does not connect it with divinity, he obviously influenced early Christian thinkers like Augustine,

which influenced Christianity as a whole. In connection with (1), it becomes understandable why this “fateful choice” was never really challenged through the centuries.

Wolterstorff writes that in the twentieth century, “(a) good many ... theologians have been engaged in what one might call the dehellenization of Christian theology” (Wolterstorff 1975, p. 79). In the light of sections 2 through 5, this looks like a main project for Christian theology.

7. The atemporalist’s last stronghold: divine foreknowledge

There remains one last “stronghold” of atemporalism: divine foreknowledge. Atemporalism can explain divine foreknowledge apparently without endangering human free will, while temporalism suffers considerable tension here.

Let’s begin with temporalism. Nelson Pike (Pike 1965) conclusively argues that if God has complete foreknowledge of the future, it is not within our power to refrain from the actions we’re doing. Clearly, Pike puts God in a temporal setting. If Jones performs an action A at t_1 and God has complete foreknowledge of the future, then God will hold at t_0 the belief that Jones will perform A at t_1 . In order to be free to refrain from A, (1) Jones would need the power to make God non-existing at t_0 or (2) the power to make God not have the belief that Jones will perform A at t_1 or (3) the power to make God hold a false belief at t_0 . As none of those options can obtain, Pike concludes that Jones was not free to refrain from performing A.

Atemporalism seems to have less problems here. For one, God is not in time. There is therefore no “earlier” and “later” and no backward causation necessary to open up the possibility of free will. Second, the atemporalist can construe God’s foreknowledge with *conditional necessity*, as Boethius suggested:

...there is no necessity to compel a voluntary walker to proceed, though it is necessary that, if he walks, he should be proceeding. In the same way, if Providence sees an event in its present, that thing must be, though it has no necessity of its own nature. (Boethius 1902, Book V, 165)

On this account, it is necessary that God knows the man walking, but it is not necessary that the man walks because God knows it. Atemporalism allows this move because for the atemporal God, all things in time are present *all at once* in an eternal “present”. Just as we do not necessitate anyone

whom we see walking before our eyes to walk, so does the eternal God not necessitate anyone to do anything, even if he sees all those actions at once and from our viewpoint *foresees* all that is temporally ahead of us.

If one sticks to strong version of divine foreknowledge (foreknowledge with maximal detail), atemporalism fares better than temporalism. However, I doubt that Scripture forces us to adopt such a strong view. It is crystal clear that the Bible wants us to believe in divine foreknowledge, and that God knows the future with considerable detail (see, e.g. Is 53; Mt 26:75); what is not clear is that this biblical picture must be explained with an atemporalist concept of divine foreknowledge. But this is another story.

¹ I consider the oft-used term “eternalist” for proponents of divine timelessness as misleading. It suggests to be the exclusive view endorsing divine beginning- and endless existence, but this is also part of most temporalist views. Eternalism’s USP is timelessness, not everlasting existence.

² For example, the propositions „God is good“ and „God is God“ are equivalent, because „God = good“.

³ Acts 1:9-11

References:

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