

A Timeless God?

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The doctrine of God's timelessness is now very unpopular. Several major objections have been levelled against it, and these can be summarised thus:

- 1 If God is timeless, he cannot be a person.
- 2 If God is timeless, his knowledge entails absurd consequences or is restricted.
- 3 If God is timeless, he cannot act.
- 4 If God is timeless, he cannot command our admiration or love.
- 5 There is Biblical precedent for rejecting the view that God is timeless.
- 6 There is no good reason for supposing that if there is a God, then he is timeless.

I think these objections are answerable, and here I propose briefly to say why.

What might be meant by the assertion 'God is timeless'? The most detailed discussion of this question known to me is Nelson Pike's *God and Timelessness* (London, 1970). And, as Pike suggests, it seems reasonable to argue as follows:

First, if God is timeless, He has no duration, i.e. He lacks temporal extension ... It is not just that the life of God lacks temporal limits: the point is that it has no temporal spread at all. Secondly, if God is timeless, God also lacks temporal location. God did not exist *before* Columbus discovered America nor will he exist *after* the turn of the century ... The point seems to be that God is not to be qualified by temporal predicates (such as, e.g. 'six years old') nor time-location predicates (such as, e.g. 'before Columbus'). (pp 7 f.)

As Pike indicates, these views can be found in writers like Augustine, Anselm, Boethius, and Aquinas. So to call God timeless is to place him right outside time. It is to say that he occupies no temporal point, and that he neither endures through time nor stands in temporal relationship to events in time.

Now if God is timeless, can he be a person? I think that contemporary rejection of the doctrine of God's timelessness is much to be explained with reference to this question. For it is widely held that God is a person and that 'timeless person' is a contradiction. Thus, in *A Treatise on Time and Space* (London, 1973) J. R. Lucas writes: 'To say that God is outside time, as many theologians

do, is to deny, in effect, that God is a person' (p 200). And this suggestion has some merit. What would be left of me if I had no temporal location or extension? Very little, if anything, that we associate with being alive as a human being.

But this does not prove that what is timeless cannot also be referred to as a person. For, if we have sufficient reason to do so, we may intelligibly apply old words in new ways. And, though all the human beings of our acquaintance have temporal location and extension, it may be legitimate to say that what is true of them, that they are persons, may also be true of what has no temporal extension and location. Suppose we have reason for believing in what cannot have temporal location or extension. And suppose we have reason for talking of it by means of terms traditionally used in talking about God – 'intelligent', 'knowing', 'purposive' and the like. Might we not then reasonably call it a 'person'? I can see no compelling reason for supposing in advance that we might not, in which case it would not be obviously nonsensical to speak of a timeless person even though in doing so one would be talking of what was very different indeed from the persons of our acquaintance. And this point ought, I think, to weigh heavily with those who both believe that God is a person and yet deny that he can be timeless. For they almost always want to agree that God is very different from the persons of our acquaintance. They say, for example, that he is incorporeal, omnipotent, and omniscient. Why should they rule out the possibility of his also being timeless? Or are they saying that most persons do not have bodies, or that most of them are omnipotent and omniscient? They appear to be saying that there is reason for believing in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient person without a body. In that case, however, how can they know that there could be no reason for believing in a timeless person? I do not see that they can know this. Pointing to the fact that the persons of our acquaintance are temporal is not enough. It must also be shown that no reason could be given for saying of something that it was both a person and timeless.

But there is another reason for being suspicious of the view that God cannot be a timeless person. For it makes sense to deny that God is a person in the sense of 'person' used by those who appeal to 'God is a person' in the context of supposing that God must be in time. For those who make this appeal want us to think of God as some kind of individual, very like human beings, who exists alongside them, albeit invisibly. Thus, for example, according to Richard Swinburne, God cannot be timeless and 'Theism postulates God as a being with intentions, beliefs, and capacities, but ones of a very simple kind, so simple that it postulates the simplest kind of person there could be' (*The Existence of God*, Oxford,

1979, pp 93 f.). Swinburne's God is a being alongside others, a mind with many and changing thoughts. He is a member of the world. He can be counted along with you and I. He has successive states. But should we think of God in this way? Arguably not. It has traditionally been held that God cannot be something caused to exist by anything, yet the existence of a God *qua* person in Swinburne's sense invites the question 'What brought about the existence of God?' (unless we accept the dubious idea that the existence of God is a demonstrable matter of logical necessity).

Swinburne might say that this is incompatible with the Christian concept of God. But is it? Swinburne's God is basically comprehensible, for he is part of a world of which we too are parts. God, for Swinburne, is like human beings, except that he has no body and his knowledge, power and moral rectitude are greater than ours. By contrast, however, God as talked about in the mainstream of Judeo-Christianity is incomprehensible, unimaginable, and quite unlike human beings. He is also unchangeable and the Creator of all things – this meaning that nothing but God exists uncaused. On this view God defies classification. And to talk of him as a person in Swinburne's sense is nonsense or idolatrous. On this view God is the cause of all diversity, the cause of all change, the reason why there is anything at all.

But what of the view that God cannot be timeless in view of his knowledge? What does this view amount to? One form of it has been offered by Swinburne in *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford, 1977) and by Anthony Kenny in *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford, 1979). They argue that if God exists timelessly, he exists simultaneously to all moments of human time so that God is simultaneously present yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Since if A is simultaneous with B and B with C, then A is simultaneous with C, if God is simultaneously present yesterday and today, then yesterday and today are simultaneous, which is absurd. But this argument assumes that God's timeless knowledge is somehow temporal, for the claim is that it entails absurdity derived from the notion of simultaneity. Yet the view that God's knowledge is temporal must be one of the things that the doctrine of God's timelessness rules out. Swinburne and Kenny have therefore failed to engage with the doctrine, and their argument fails to refute it.

But all of this raises another problem. God is timeless, he is immutable. But if God has knowledge, if, indeed, he is omniscient, must he not be mutable? Suppose he is omniscient. Then, presumably he now knows that I am writing this sentence. But now that I have written it, he cannot now know that I am writing it. For I am not now writing it. And does not this suggest that God changes in that things which come to be true and cease to be

true fall within the range of his knowledge as they come to be true and cease to be true? We can escape this conclusion by denying that God knows things at any time since he is timeless. But, so it has been argued, this only leaves us in another mess since when asked what God knows now we must say 'Nothing', and when asked what God will know tomorrow we must again say 'Nothing' (cf A N Prior. 'The Formalities of Omniscience', *Philosophy*, xxxvii, 1962).

But again we are dealing with a confused objection. For why suppose that God has to know anything *now*? Because if God knows nothing now, then he is ignorant? But there is another possibility: that God knows what comes to pass in time without knowing it as it comes to pass. And this is just what advocates of God's timelessness suppose to be the case. Their point is not that God is ignorant, but that there is no time at which God is either ignorant or knowledgeable. This is not to deny that God knows, but it is to deny that God's knowledge is something dateable and/or changing. As Aquinas puts it:

'Whatever God knew, he knows' is not true if the reference is to the facts as stated in the propositions. But it does not follow that God's knowledge is changeable ... There is no change in the divine knowledge through his knowing that one and the same thing at one time exists and at another time does not; and in the same way, there is no change in his knowledge that a certain proposition is at one time true, at another time false.

(*Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 14, 16)

God may not now know that I am writing, but he can know that I am writing now. One might reply that God cannot know that I am writing now if God does not now know that I am writing. But this seems to suppose that what is known when it is known at some time that something is then true can only be known at the time when the something in question is true. Yet one can know what is known when it is known at some time that something is then true without having to know it at that time. I can know on Wednesday what Jones knew on Tuesday when he knew that it was then Tuesday (cf. my 'Kenny on God', *Philosophy*, 57, 1982).

But can God act if he is not in time? As exponents of the view that he cannot we may consider Swinburne and Pike. According to Swinburne:

If we say that P brings about X, we can always sensibly ask *when* does he bring it about? If we say that P punishes Q, we can always sensibly ask *when* does he punish Q ... If P at t brings about X, then necessarily X comes into existence (simultaneously with or) subsequently to P's action ... And so on.

(*The Coherence of Theism*, p 221)

Pike's view is similar, but he applies it to the notion of creation. If God creates, then he produces or sustains. But, says Pike, 'The specialized verbs we use when describing a case of deliberate or intentional production ... seem to carry with them identifiable implications regarding the relative temporal positions of the items produced and the creative-activity involved in their production' (op. cit. p 106). Pike holds that temporal implications 'seem to be there in every case; they seem to be part of the "essence" of "produce" ' (p 107), and that if we have sustaining activity, we must have the sustainer doing something that takes time.

We can, of course, agree that there is something in what Swinburne says. If you are told that someone produced a novel, you can ask 'When?' And so on. But we can, for example, say when God brings about (brought about) X, and when he punishes (or punished) Q without supposing that God is himself in time. For something is brought about by an agent and someone is punished by an agent only when the something in question is brought about or the person in question is punished. Suppose we say X has been brought about by God. Then we ask 'When?'. Suppose the answer is '4 o'clock on Tuesday'. Does this mean that God must have occupied the moment of time we call 4 o'clock on Tuesday? No. It need only mean that at 4 o'clock on Tuesday such and such came to pass by virtue of God. Then again, suppose we say 'P has been punished by God'. We ask 'When?'. Suppose the answer is 'Last Wednesday when P dropped dead'. Does this mean that God must have occupied the moment of time we refer to as 'last Wednesday when P dropped dead'? No. It need only mean that P dropped dead last Wednesday by virtue of God. And as for Swinburne's point that 'If P at t brings about X, then necessarily X comes into existence (simultaneously with or) subsequently to P's action', that just begs the question at issue. If 'P' is God, how do we know that his bringing about can be located in time if that is meant to imply that God is himself in time? We may know that things are brought about at different times and that God brings them about, that they are there because of God. But why may not God bring it about that something has temporal location without himself having temporal location? In general, Swinburne confuses 'God brings it about that X is true at t' and 'God, occupying some moment of time, brings it about at that time that X is true'. And this point is relevant to Pike's position. What if we have reason for saying that something has been brought about and yet that there is reason for denying that what accounts for what is brought about has temporal location and extension? Then we have reason for denying that the notion of bringing about always implies that which by existing at some time brings about. Whether or not we

could have reason for denying this is not to be decided, as Pike seems to think, by looking at what seems to be true of familiar cases of bringing about. And if the claim is that God brings about without having temporal location of extension, what is required are not examples of bringing about when it is not God who is said to bring about.

But we now come to the claim that if God is timeless, he cannot command our admiration or love. This view (which can be traced in a number of modern theologians including Jürgen Moltmann and Jon Sobrino) is commonly associated with so-called 'process-theology', of which Charles Hartshorne is an eminent representative. In his view one must ask 'Whether and how God can be conceived without logical absurdity, and as having such a character that an enlightened person may worship and serve him with whole heart and mind' (*The Divine Relativity*, New Haven and London, 1948, p 1). Hartshorne's answer, a familiar one, is that God changes in his relationship with human beings and that his goodness lies in this. When he knows us in our joys, he shares joy with us. When he knows us as suffering, he suffers too. And this means that there can be a personal relationship with God which means something to both parties. God, in short, is a social being.

And it is easy to see the attraction of this view. We normally recognize that someone who is saddened by human pain is better than someone totally unaffected by it. And we normally concede that someone who rejoices at the good is better than someone indifferent to it. It might therefore be argued that if God is a good person, he is affected by what goes on in the world, which would make him changing and therefore timeful.

Yet Hartshorne's notion of a changing God (and any other notion significantly like it) is ultimately questionable. Even if we concede the existence of what Hartshorne calls 'God' (which I, as it happens, can see no reason for doing), we can still pursue the question 'Why does this thing exist?' or 'On what does its existence depend?'. Hartshorne presumably wants to say that God is the world's Creator. But is this compatible with his insistence on God's changing? Not obviously, for it can be argued that a changing God like Hartshorne's itself requires explanation. One may reply that if God does not change as writers like Hartshorne suppose, then God is not worthy of admiration or love. But I am now calling into question the suggestion that a changing thing deserves to be called 'God'. As something the existence of which raises causal questions, can Hartshorne's God be identified with God as traditionally conceived? Not if the traditional view of God insists that causal questions about God's origin are not in order, as seems to be the case.

Those who rely on the biblical evidence may, however, think that this is unimportant. And here it must be conceded that in the Bible we get what appears to be a picture of a changing (and therefore timeful) God. God is said to respond to requests, to get angry, and to rejoice. In Isaiah 38: 1-7 he appears to change his mind. Not surprisingly, therefore, in discussing the claim that 'the nature of God is to be perfect', James Barr writes as follows:

In the Bible God is presented above all as active and personal: he can change his mind, he can regret what he has done, he can be argued out of positions he has already taken up, he operates in a narrative sequence and not out of a static perfection. The picture which presents perfection as the essence of the doctrine of God is clearly of Greek origin and is well represented in the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions.

(Fundamentalism, London 1977, p 277)

But there are biblical passages which point in the direction of a timeless deity if, that is to say, changelessness is linked with timelessness. And, in any case, the Bible has little option but to speak of God as if he were in time. For, according to the biblical writers, one can ascribe knowledge and agency to God, and when we think of knowledge together with agency we naturally create pictures of what is temporal. Even people who explicitly hold that God is timeless speak of him as if he were temporal. But this **does** not mean that their listeners are compelled to ascribe to them a doctrine of God's timefulness, or to espouse such a doctrine themselves in view of the way the people they are listening to speak of God.

It is also worth adding that the biblical talk of God as in time does not, by itself, commit someone who takes the Bible as authoritative to supposing that God really is in time. If it did, then someone who took the Bible to be authoritative would be committed to thinking of God in an absurd way. For the Bible does not only talk of God as if he were in time. It says, for example, that he is a rock and a fire (Deut. 32: 15; 4: 24). Presumably nobody supposes that God is literally a rock or a fire (or many of the other names by which he is called in the scriptures). Why, then, should anyone feel bound by the Bible to the conclusion that God is in time? Because the Bible speaks of God as if he were in time? But it also speaks of God as if he were a rock, a fire, and all the rest of it. In these matters a certain amount of sensitivity and common sense needs to be applied. And if we have reason for supposing that God cannot literally be in time, then we can, I think, say that biblical talk of God being in time need not be taken literally.

So I suggest that some of the standard objections to divine timelessness are not cogent. Yet is there any reason for denying that

God is in time? Yes. For, as I have noted, the theist has an interest in being able to reject the question 'What brought about God's existence?'. And the theist, I think, can only reject this question if he agrees that God is timeless. For we can surely ask of any temporal thing 'What brought about its existence?'.

Perhaps I can develop this point by concentrating for a moment on change in the sense of succession. Things can be said to be in time since they have a history, since we can speak of them in terms of before and after, since, in this sense, they change. Change, in this sense, and time go together, for it is with reference to change as succession that the passing of time is established. Newton's view of time allows for there being time in the absence of any change. For Newton, there can be time without succession. Yet the absence of succession would involve the absence of anything changing with respect to succession. And in the absence of any such thing there would be no way of cashing, or justifying, or making intelligible the statement that any period of time has passed, as Leibniz argues in his correspondence with Samuel Clarke. At one point he turns to the question: 'Could God have created the world sooner?'. His reply, which seems to me correct, is that the supposition of God creating sooner makes no sense since it is only with the presence of creation that there can be time.

So I should argue that anything that changes is, by virtue of this fact, part of time. But suppose, now, that we have a world of changing things, or just one changing thing. Then, I am suggesting, we have something of which we can ask 'What brought about its existence?'. And whatever is not subject to this question cannot be something changing. It cannot be something that is first like this, and later like that. And this means that it cannot be in time, for to be in time is to undergo change; it is to go through some process where what goes through the process is first like this and later like that.

One may, of course, reply that something may change in no respect and still be in time. For may it not occupy a single moment of time and thus have temporal location? But this is no defence of God's timefulness since nobody would argue that God only occupies a single moment of time. It may be said that God is utterly changeless in himself, but is still in time since he exists for as long as other changing things exist. Yet this brings us back to the point that time and change go together. What sense does it make to speak of something enduring through time but changing in no respect? One might say that an object can be changeless since it can retain its character in a changing world. But it would still be part of a changing world and it would therefore be in time. It would also be something of which we can reasonably ask 'Why does it

exist?'. One might reply to this by suggesting that a temporal but unchanging God could exist before or after the existence of a world of changing objects. But something simply going on and on is, I suggest, something that calls out for explanation. And I do not see how something which just goes on and on can count as a satisfactory explanation here. In any case, how are we to make sense of something existing in time yet before or after the existence of a world of changing things? We could do so if the notion of absolute time were intelligible, as on Newton's supposition. But, so I am suggesting, that supposition is questionable. We might suppose that each period of time with an end must be followed by a period of time, and that every instant must be followed by another. We might then suggest that if material objects ceased to exist, or if all changing things ceased to exist, there would still be time, and that the same holds if we talk of the beginning of material objects or changing things. But there could be no way of noting the passage of time in the absence of change, so the notion of time before and after the existence of changing things is an idle one.

This argument has been contested on logical grounds, for it has been urged that time without changing things is logically conceivable. Thus, in *Space and Time* (2nd edn. London 1981, p 172), Swinburne has written:

Time, like space, is of logical necessity unbounded. After any period of time which has at some instant an end, there must be another period of time, and so after every instant. For either there will be swans somewhere subsequent to a period T, or there will not. In either case there must be a period subsequent to T, during which there will or will not be swans.

But how does Swinburne know this? Why may not swans cease to exist *and there be no time which is: the time after which they cease to exist?* If swans exist after T, then there is a time after T at which swans exist. But if there are no swans after T, we do not have to conclude that there is a time after T. There may just be nothing and no time.

In contesting this suggestion Swinburne appeals to an argument derived from some remarks of Sydney Shoemaker. He suggests that 'it seems logically possible that there should be a period of time in which there was nothing existent, preceded and followed by periods of time in which physical objects existed' and that one could have *inductive* evidence for the existence of such periods.

There could be a world, divided into three regions, A, B, C. On A physical objects vanish for a year every three years, after which objects similar to those which disappeared reappear. The objects in B vanish for a year every four years, and those

in C for a year every five years, similar objects reappearing in the two regions after the year. These cycles of disappearance will coincide every sixty years. There would then be a period of a year in which there was nothing existent. Observers would have inductive evidence of the existence of such a period.

(p 174)

But this example is of no help to Swinburne either. Suppose objects in A disappear. How do observers know that they have ceased to exist? And if they have ceased to exist, why suppose that there is any way of determining the time of their non-existence apart from the fact that objects in B and C continue to change? If people in B and C know that A has gone for one year, what can this mean but that B and C have enjoyed a year? And what can this mean except that there have been changes which constitute the measure for time passing in B and C? And how would one know that there had come a time when A, B, and C ceased to have any members? I do not see how one could know this at all. Swinburne might say that one could infer at some time that there was a previous period when nothing existed, a period sandwiched between two periods when there were things. But to talk of a period here makes no sense. What can a period be but a duration distinguished by virtue of things in relationship involving change? How can there be a 'period' when there is nothing at all? One may intelligibly talk of a thing 'disappearing' for a while. But one can only do this if one is able to determine the time of the thing's disappearance with reference to the existence of changing things in relation. If we say that the magician's rabbit 'disappeared' for ten minutes, what else can we mean but that the hands of the clocks (and various other things) moved thus and so, and that we saw no rabbit?

In short, then, if there is a God it seems reasonable to suppose that he is timeless. Far from entailing the falsity or incoherence of theism, it can be held that the doctrine that God is timeless is actually entailed by theism. And, given that the doctrine is now widely rejected in the name of theism, the point seems worth making. Are theists who reject the doctrine putting themselves on safe ground? Or are they cutting their own throats? I suspect the latter.